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ELLERY QUEEN'S MAGAZINE

HOLMES FOR THE HOLIDAYS

A Snaking Suspicion by H. R. F. Keating and 16 other stories

Malachy McCourt & Ronan O'Ceallaigh
(see page 135)

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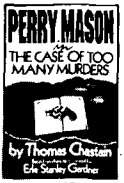

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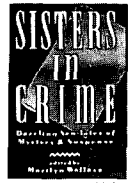

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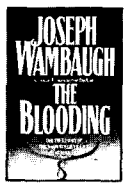

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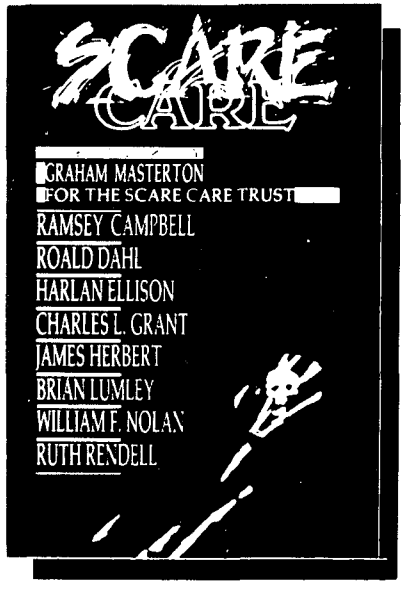

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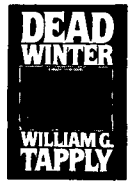

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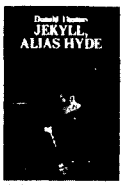

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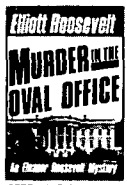

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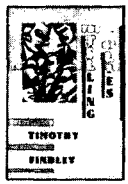

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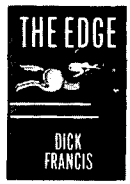

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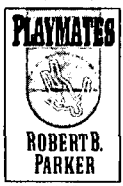

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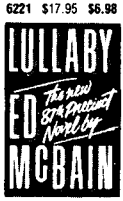

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a special Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"I want you to steal the Christmas stocking hanging from the fireplace at my granddaughter's," Simpson said. "Any time after midnight."

"Does it contain something valuable?" Nick asked.

"The gift inside will be valueless, but I want that, too."

"Where does she live?"

"With her mother in a duplex apartment on upper Fifth Avenue." He produced a piece of paper from his pocket. "Here's the address. I warn you, the building has tight security."

"I'll get in."

"Phone me at this number if you're successful." He walked Nick to the lobby, and as Nick started for the door he said, "Oh, and Mr. Velvet—"

Nick turned. "Yes?"

"Merry Christmas."

A story that proves Nick Velvet is not above (or below) catching the Christmas spirit . . .

THE THEFT OF THE CHRISTMAS STOCKING

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It always seemed more like Christmas with snow in the air, even if there were only fat white flakes that melted as they hit the sidewalk. Walking briskly along Fifth Avenue at noon on Christmas Eve, Nick Velvet was aware of the last-minute crowds clutching red-and-green shopping bags that must have delighted the mer-

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chants. When he turned in at the building on the corner of Fifty-fourth Street, he wasn't surprised to see that the pre-Christmas festivities had spread even here, within the confines of one of Manhattan's most exclusive private clubs.

The slender, sour-faced man behind the desk inside the door eyed Nick for an instant and asked, "Are you looking for the Dellon-Simpson Christmas party?"

"Mr. Charles Simpson," Nick confirmed. "I have an appointment with him here."

The guardian of the door consulted his list. "You'd be Mr. Velvet?"

"That's right."

"You'll find Mr. Simpson in the library, straight ahead. He's expecting you."

Nick crossed the marble floor, past a curving staircase that led up to a surprisingly noisy party, and entered the library through tall oak doors that shut out virtually all sound. Inside was a clubroom from a hundred years ago, complete with an elderly member dozing in front of the fireplace.

"Mr. Velvet?" a voice asked, and Nick turned and saw a figure rising from the shadow of an oversized wing chair.

"That's correct. You'd be Charles Simpson?"

"I would be." By the flickering firelight, Nick could make out a tall man with a noble face and furry white sideburns. He looked to be a vigorous sixty or so and his handshake was a grip of steel. "Thank you for coming."

"I'm keeping you from your firm's Christmas party."

"Nonsense. Business before pleasure, even on Christmas Eve. I want you to steal something for me, Mr. Velvet."

"That's my business. You understand the conditions? Nothing of value, and my fee—"

"I was told in advance. But it must be done tonight. Is that a problem?"

"No. What's the object?"

Simpson's face crinkled into a tight-lipped smile. "A Christmas stocking. I want you to steal the Christmas stocking hanging from the fireplace at my granddaughter's. Any time after midnight."

"Does it contain something valuable?"

"The gift inside will be valueless, but I want that, too."

"Where does she live?"

"With her mother in a duplex apartment on upper Fifth Avenue."

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He produced a piece of paper from his pocket. "Here's the address. I warn you, the building has tight security."

"I'll get in."

"Phone me at this number if you're successful." He walked Nick to the lobby, and as Nick started for the door he said, "Oh, and Mr. Velvet—"

Nick turned. "Yes?"

"Merry Christmas."

After explaining on the phone to Gloria why he wouldn't be home until well after midnight, Nick journeyed up Fifth Avenue to the address he'd been given. It proved to be a fine old building with a doorman, and a security guard seated behind a bank of television monitors. There would be a TV camera in each of the elevators, at the service entrance, and probably in the stairwell.

Nick walked around the block and thought about it. The most likely way to gain access to the building would be to pose as a delivery man. He could rent a uniform, buy a poinsettia, and walk right past the doorman as if he were delivering it to one of the apartments. It wouldn't work after midnight, of course. He'd have to gain access to the building much earlier and find a hiding place out of range of the TV cameras.

Suprisingly—or not—as Nick again approached the front of the building, a florist's van pulled up in front of the building. A young man got out, walked quickly around to the rear, and opened the doors. He brought out a huge poinsettia that almost hid his face and walked into the lobby with it. Nick stopped on the sidewalk to light a cigarette and pause as if in thought.

The doorman immediately took the plant from the young man, checked the address tag, and sent him on his way. He picked up the house phone and presently one of the building employees appeared to complete the plant's delivery. Through it all, the security man never left his post behind the TV monitors.

Nick sighed and strolled away. A delivery wouldn't gain him access to the apartment, not even on Christmas Eve. It would have to be something else. He glanced again at the note he carried in his pocket: Florence Beaufeld, it read. Apt. 501.

The name was not Simpson, he'd noticed at once. If the child was his granddaughter, that meant the mother she lived with was probably Charles Simpson's daughter, separated, widowed, or divorced.

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Nick wondered why Simpson couldn't go to the apartment himself on Christmas Day and perform his own stocking theft.

Nick wasn't paid to think too much about the motives of his clients—that had gotten him into trouble enough in the past—but he did feel he should know whether Florence was the mother's or the daughter's name. The phonebook showed only one Beaufeld at that address: Beaufeld, F. It seemed likely that Florence was the child's mother, Florence Simpson Beaufeld.

None of which would help him gain entrance to the apartment after midnight. He crossed Fifth Avenue and tried to get a better view of the building from Central Park. Assuming Apartment 501 was on the fifth floor, it had to face either the side street or the park. The other two sides of the building abutted adjoining buildings on Fifth Avenue and the side street. But the top stories of all three buildings were set back, so there was no access between them across the rooftops. No one could have reached the top of any of the buildings except Santa Claus.

The more Nick thought about it, the more convinced he became that it would have to be Santa Claus.

At eleven-thirty that night, he approached the front door of the building. The padding of the Santa Claus suit was warm and uncomfortable, smelling faintly of scented powder, and the bag of fancily wrapped gifts he'd slung over his shoulder weighed more than he'd expected. The doorman saw him coming and held open the portals for him. That was the first good sign. Santa was expected.

"Ho ho ho!" Nick thundered in the heartiest voice he could manage.

The doorman smiled good-naturedly. "Got a gift for me, Santa?"

"Ho ho ho!" Nick took out one of the gifts he'd bought to fill the top of the sack. "Right here, sonny!"

The doorman smiled and accepted the slim flat box. "Looks like a necktie to me. Thanks a lot, Santa. Which party do you want, the Brewsters or the Trevensons?"

"Brewsters," Nick decided.

"Seventeenth floor."

Nick glanced toward the security guard and saw him looking through the early edition of the following morning's *Times*. He entered the nearest elevator and pressed the button for seventeen. As soon as the door closed and the elevator started to rise, he hit the fifth-floor button, too. The TV camera might spot him getting off at

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the wrong floor, but it was less of a risk than being seen running down the stairwell with his bag of tricks.

The corridor on the fifth floor was silent and deserted, lit only by an indirect glow from unseen fixtures near the ceiling. There were only three doors, so he knew 501 was going to be a large apartment. He glanced at his watch and saw that it wasn't yet midnight. Then he listened at the door of 501. Hearing nothing, he reached deep into his bag and extracted a leather case of lock picks. It took him just forty-five seconds to unlock the door. He was mildly surprised that the chain lock wasn't latched, but the reason quickly became obvious. The woman of the house, Florence Beaufeld, was preparing to go out.

By the glow of a twelve-foot Christmas tree standing near the spiral staircase in the duplex, he saw a handsome brown-haired woman of around forty adjusting a glistening earring. It was her hair, done in an unusual style that evoked the idea of a layered helmet, that caught his attention. She finished adjusting the earring, straightened the neckline of her red-velvet dress, and picked up a sequined purse.

Nick slipped into the dining area, taking shelter in the shadows behind a china cabinet, as the woman stepped to the foot of the staircase and called out, "I'm going up to the Brewsters' party, Michelle. Go to bed now, it's almost midnight. And don't peek at your gifts!" There was a mumbled reply from upstairs as Mrs. Beaufeld let herself out of the apartment.

Nick waited, sweating in his Santa suit, until he heard a grandfather clock chime midnight. Then he left his hiding place and moved silently across the carpeted floor toward the lighted Christmas tree. A fireplace was beyond the tree, along an inside wall, and above it was an oil portrait of Florence Beaufeld seated with a protective arm around a lovely young girl about eight years old. Below it, taped to the mantel, was a single red Christmas stocking, bulging with an unseen gift.

Carefully setting down the bag, Nick moved to the mantel. He reached out and took the stocking in his hand, carefully pulling the tape away from the wood. As he did, he heard the slightest of sounds behind him and turned to see a young woman in a short nightgown and bare legs standing at the foot of the staircase, a tiny automatic held firmly in her right hand.

"Get your hand off my stocking, Santa," she said, "or I'll send you back to the North Pole in a wooden box . . ."

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Nick did as he was told. "Come now," he said gruffly, "you don't want to point that thing at Santa."

She motioned slightly with the pistol. "Take off the hat and beard. I like to see who I'm talking to."

He tossed the red hat on the floor and pulled the sticky beard away from his skin.

"Satisfied now?" he asked in his normal voice.

"Say, you're not bad-looking. Who are you?"

"Do you mind if I take off this coat and padding before we talk? It's really quite uncomfortable."

"Sure, but don't try anything. I've seen all the movies." She watched him while he dropped the coat on the floor with the rest and then pulled the padding from his pants. He'd worn jeans and a black turtleneck under the Santa suit in case he had to shed it to make his escape. With the padding out, the red pants fell by themselves and he stepped out of them.

"Now, what was your question?"

"Who are you?"

She spoke with an educated, private-school voice, even when her words were tough and gritty. Nick guessed Michelle Beaufeld was now in her late teens.

"I'm a friend of your grandfather," he told her.

"Charles Simpson?" The truth seemed to dawn on her. "Oh, no!" She started to laugh. "He wanted you to steal the gift!"

"Well, the stocking the gift is in."

She shook her head. "Santa Claus, the thief! Won't that make a story for the papers? Grandpa Tries To Steal Child's Christmas Gift."

"You're no child," Nick pointed out. "Why don't you put away that gun? I'm not going to hurt you."

She motioned toward the Santa Claus outfit on the floor. "Put your pants back on."

"They're too big for me without the padding."

"That's the idea. If you try to rush me, they'll trip you up."

When he'd done as she ordered, she sat in an easy chair and carefully set the pistol down on an end table by her side. "Now we can talk," she said. "I know Grandpa wouldn't send anyone to harm me, but I can understand his wanting to get his hands on that gift. Let's have a look at it—toss the stocking over here. No funny business now!"

Nick did as he was told, convinced now that she wouldn't think of shooting him any more than he'd think of harming her. The

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stocking landed on the chair by her side and she picked it up, withdrawing the gift in its holiday wrapping. As she worked at unwrapping it, she reminded Nick of her mother adjusting the earring earlier. She had her mother's high cheekbones and pouting lips, and was well on her way to becoming a great beauty. Putting aside the wrapping, she held up a little plastic pig for Nick to see. It was a gift more suitable for a child of five or six. "There we go! I'll put it with the others."

"What others?"

"Didn't Grandpa tell you? They're gifts from my father. He sends one every Christmas."

"Does he know how old you are?"

"Of course he does. They have a special meaning."

"Oh?"

"*That's* what Grandpa's dying to find out—what their special meaning is."

"Do *you* know?" he asked.

"Well—not yet," she admitted. "It's about something I'm supposed to get when I'm eighteen."

"How old are you now?"

"Seventeen. My birthday's next month."

"Does your father ever come to see you?"

She shook her head. "Not since I was twelve. The only time I hear from him is at Christmas, and then it's just the gift in the stocking. There hasn't been a note since the first time."

"How does he deliver them? I know you don't believe in Santa Claus."

That brought a genuine smile. "I don't know. I suppose Mother must put them there, although she's always denied it."

"What does your grandfather have to do with any of this?"

Her face showed exasperation, then uncertainty. "Why am I telling you my family history when I should be calling the police?"

"Because you wouldn't want to call the police and implicate your grandfather. You told me yourself how funny the headline would look. Besides, I might be able to help you."

"How?"

"It seems to me you've got a real mystery on your hands. If I can solve it for you, there'd be no need for you to keep this little pig, would there?"

"What do you mean?"

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"You'd have the answer to your mystery and I'd have the gift to deliver to your grandfather in the stocking."

"He's paying you for this, isn't he?"

"Yes," Nick admitted.

"How much?"

"A great deal. It's how I make my living."

She picked up the automatic and for a split second he thought she was going to shoot him, after all. "Take off those foolish red pants," she said, "and let's have a beer."

The kitchen had a sleek contemporary look that clashed with the rest of the apartment. Michelle opened the refrigerator and brought out two bottles of a popular German beer. "Aren't you a bit young to be drinking beer?" Nick asked as she poured two glasses.

"Aren't you a bit old to be a thief?"

"All right," he agreed with a smile, "let's get down to business. Tell me about your father."

"His name is Dan Beaufeld. When I was a child, he ran a charter-boat business in Florida. He was away from New York most of the time, especially in the winter when he had a lot of tourist business. Sometimes my mother would take me down to visit him and we'd get to ride on one of his deep-sea-fishing boats. I was twelve the last time I saw him, five years ago. That was when my mother divorced him. At the time I had no idea what it was all about. Somehow I blamed myself, which I guess a lot of kids do. My mother had bought this apartment with her own money, so she stayed here. My father moved to Florida year-round."

"Did you understand what caused the divorce?"

"Not at first. I knew my grandfather had been part of it. I thought he'd poisoned my mother's mind against my father. Once when he found me sobbing in my room, he told me I shouldn't cry over my father because he was a bad man—an evil man."

Charter boats in Florida in the mid-1980s suggested only one thing to Nick. "Could your father have been involved in drug traffic?"

"That's what Grandpa finally told me, just last year. He said he'd made a lot of money using his boats for drug smuggling and that the police were still looking for him. That was why Grandpa forced my mother to divorce him. He was afraid the family would be tainted or something."

"What about these mysterious gifts?"

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"They started when I was thirteen. There was a note attached to the first one. It was from my father and he said I was always in his thoughts. He said to keep the gifts, and when I was eighteen they'd make me wealthy. The gifts have appeared in my stocking every Christmas, but there were never any more notes."

"What were the gifts?"

"The first was a little toy bus with a greyhound on the side. Then there was a copy of Poe's poem "The Raven," which I loved when I was fourteen. The third year was an apple, and I ate that. Last year there was a snapshot of Mother my father had taken when they were still married. Now there's this plastic pig."

"An odd combination of gifts," Nick admitted. "I can't see—"

"Who the hell are *you?"* a voice asked from the doorway.

Nick turned to see Florence Beaufeld standing wide-eyed at the kitchen door, taking in the scene before her.

He stood up, more as a reflex action than from any real fear of attack. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Beaufeld. My name is Nick Velvet."

"What are you doing here with my daughter?"

"Mother—"

"Were you sent by her father? Are you this year's Christmas gift?"

"He was sent to steal the gift, Mother! I caught him by the fireplace dressed up like Santa Claus."

"And you're sitting here chatting with him? Where are the police?"

"I didn't call them."

"My God, Michelle!"

"I'm perfectly all right, Mother. Please."

"Go upstairs and put on some clothes. I'll attend to Mr. Velvet."

Michelle hesitated and then decided to obey her mother's command. She left the kitchen without a word and went up the staircase, taking the automatic with her. Florence Beaufeld turned back to Nick. "Now tell me the truth. What are you doing here?"

"I was hired by your father, Mrs. Beaufeld."

"I should have guessed as much. Whenever I mentioned those Christmas gifts from Dan it threw him into a frenzy. I vowed not to tell him if there was one this year, but he had to know. He said Dan was planning to give Michelle a large sum of illegal drug money."

"Why would he do that?"

Mrs. Beaufeld shook her head. "Only because he loves her, I sup-

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pose, and she's his daughter. He's been hiding out from the police for over five years now, and he's never seen her in all that time."

"What do *you* make of these gifts?"

"I suppose they're a message of some sort, like a child's puzzle, but I haven't been able to read it. Was there another gift tonight?"

"A plastic pig. But perhaps I don't have to tell you that—your daughter suspects you're the one who leaves them for her."

"I swear I'm not! I have no contact with Dan. That stocking was empty earlier this evening. I looked."

"At what time?"

"Shortly before ten, I think."

"Who was in the apartment after that?"

"Only Michelle and me."

"No one else?"

"I have a woman who cooks and cleans for us. She left at about that time. I can't remember whether I looked at the stocking before or after she let herself out."

"Would you give me her name and address?"

"Are you a detective of some sort?"

"Only a professional trying to earn some money. I was hired to bring your father the stocking with the latest gift. Maybe if I solve the riddle for your daughter, she'll let me have it. Then everyone will be happy."

"Well, I'm certain Agnes isn't involved, but you can have her address if you want." She wrote it on a piece of notepaper.

"One other thing. Before I leave, could I see the gifts your daughter received? She told me she ate the apple, but the others?"

She studied him through narrowed eyes. "You have a way with you, Mr. Velvet. For all I know you're nothing but a common thief, yet you charmed my daughter and now you seem to be doing the same with me. Come upstairs. I'll ask Michelle to show you the gifts."

He followed her up the staircase and waited discreetly in the hallway while she checked to see that her daughter was wearing a robe. Then he entered the girl's bedroom. All seventeen years of her life seemed to be crammed haphazardly into it. Michelle led him to a bookcase where a rock star's poster dominated shelves of alphabet books and stuffed toys. There the four objects were lined up, just as she had described them—the toy bus, the Poe poem, the snapshot of Mrs. Beaufeld, and now the pig.

"Michelle will be eighteen next month," Nick said. "It's my un-

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derstanding the message must be complete, whatever it is, if it's to direct her to a fortune by then."

"But how is he able to get in here to leave these things?"

"I'm hoping Agnes can tell me that," Nick said.

The clock was chiming one as he left the apartment.

Downstairs, a different doorman and security guard were on duty. Nick slipped the doorman a ten-dollar bill. "Merry Christmas."

"Thank you, sir. Are you a resident here?"

"Only a visitor. I was wondering if you've worked here long enough to remember Dan Beaufeld. He was in Apartment 501 before his divorce about five years ago."

"Sorry, I just started last year." He called over to the security guard watching the television monitors. "Larry, were you here five years ago?"

The man shook his head. "Just over four years. The old-timers get the day and evening shifts."

"Thanks anyway," Nick said. He went out into the cold night air and took a cab home. Gloria was waiting up for him, to exchange gifts over a bottle of champagne.

The Beaufeld maid and cook, Agnes Wilson, lived on Fifth Avenue, too, but far uptown in Harlem. It was noon on Christmas Day when Nick visited the housing project where her apartment was located. Her husband eyed him suspiciously and asked, "What do you want with Agnes?"

"I just have a couple of questions. It won't take a minute."

"You a cop?"

"Do I look like one? I'm a friend of the Beaufeld family."

Agnes Wilson was small and pretty, with deep-brown eyes and a friendly smile. "I never knew Mr. Beaufeld," she said. "They were still married when I started there, but he was always in Florida. I never saw him."

"Mrs. Wilson, someone left a Christmas toy in Michelle's stocking by the fireplace last night. Do you know anything about it?"

"No."

"You didn't leave it? You weren't paid to leave it?"

"No one paid me to do anything."

"Not Dan Beaufeld?"

"Not him or anyone else."

Nick leaned forward in his chair. "Michelle has received gifts in

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her stocking for five years now—a toy bus, a poem, an apple, a photograph, and a plastic pig. Do these mean anything to you?"

"No, they don't." She seemed genuinely surprised. "I didn't know about the gifts. A couple of years back I mentioned to Mrs. Beaufeld that I thought Michelle was pretty old to be hanging a stocking on the fireplace Christmas Eve, but she just shrugged it off. It wasn't any of my business, so I shut up. Maybe it wasn't so odd, after all. I worked for a German family once that hung stockings on the fireplace for St. Nicholas every Christmas—all of them, even the parents."

"Did any strangers come to the door this week when Michelle or her mother were out?"

"No strangers get by the doorman in that building. They've got TV cameras in the elevators and everything."

Nick got up to leave, handing her a folded ten-dollar bill. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Wilson. I hope you and your husband have a Merry Christmas."

Agnes's husband saw him to the door. "You always go calling on Christmas Day?"

"Just like Santa Claus," Nick told him with a smile.

He telephoned Charles Simpson from a pay phone at the corner. "Are you having a good holiday?" he asked.

"Is that you, Velvet? What luck have you had?"

"Fair. I had the stocking in my hands, but I don't have it now."

"What was in it?"

"If I tell you, do I get paid?"

"A partial payment. I won't know if I need the stocking and the gift until I see them."

"All right. I'll try to have them tonight, or tomorrow morning for sure."

He hung up and grabbed a bus heading downtown. Ten minutes later he was back at the Beaufeld's building. The doorman was the same one who'd been on duty the previous day when he'd first scouted the building. Nick asked him if he'd known Dan Beaufeld.

The doorman told him he'd only been there three years.

Nick asked the security guard the same question.

"Me? I've been here a year. I know the mother and daughter, not the ex-husband. He never comes around, does he?"

"Not lately," Nick agreed. "Do you have keys to all the apartments?"

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"We have one set of master keys, but they never leave this locked desk unless they have to be used in an emergency."

"And there's always someone on duty here?"

"Always," the guard said, beginning to look suspiciously at Nick. "The doorman and I are never away at the same time."

"That certainly speaks well for the security here. No one gets in who isn't expected."

"Including you," the doorman said. "Who are you here to see, anyway?"

"Florence Beaufeld."

The doorman called up on the phone and then sent Nick up on the elevator.

Florence Beaufeld met him at the door with word that they'd be leaving soon to have Christmas dinner with her father. "He'll be picking us up in his car."

"This won't take long. Are you likely to discuss the gift in Michelle's Christmas stocking?"

"No chance of that."

Michelle came down the stairs. "Are *you* back again?" She was wearing a sparkling green party dress with a flared skirt. "Have you solved the riddle yet?"

"I may have. But first I'd like to see a picture of your father. A snapshot, anything."

"I threw them all away after the divorce," Florence said.

"I have one," Michelle told him and went off to get it. She returned with a snapshot of a handsome man with a moustache and a broad grin, squinting into the camera.

Nick studied it for a moment and nodded. "Now I can tell you about the gifts. It's just a theory, but I think it's correct. Here's my proposition. If I'm right, you give me the stocking and the latest gift to deliver to your grandfather."

"All right," Michelle agreed, and her mother nodded, gripping her hands together.

"I had no idea what the five gifts meant until I glimpsed those old alphabet books in your room, Michelle. I imagine your dad used to read to you from those when you were learning the alphabet." Michelle nodded silently. "Those books always use simple objects or animals to stand for the letters. Many of them start out 'A is for Apple.' "

Her mother took it up. "Of course! 'B is for Bus,' 'R is for Raven,' 'A is for Apple'—but then there was the photo of me."

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"Mother?" Nick said. " 'M is for Mother,' 'P is for Pig.' "

"Bramp?" Michelle laughed. "What does that mean?"

"That stumped me, too, until I remembered it wasn't just any bus. It had a greyhound on the side. 'G is for Greyhound.' That would give us gramp."

"Gramp," Florence Beaufeld said.

"Gramp!" her daughter repeated. "You mean Grandpa? The money was to come from him?"

"Obviously out of the question," Nick agreed. "He'd never act as a channel for your father's money, not when he opposed the whole thing so vigorously. He even hired me in the hope of learning the location of the money before you found it."

"But gramp certainly means grandfather," Florence pointed out. "It has no other meaning that I know of."

"True enough. But remember that your former husband was limiting himself to a five-letter word by using this system of symbolic Christmas gifts. The word had to be completed by today, a month before Michelle's eighteenth birthday. If gramp stands for grandfather, could the word grandfather itself signify something other than Michelle's flesh-and-blood grandfather?"

He saw the light dawn on Michelle's face first. "The grandfather clock!"

Nick smiled. "Let's take a look."

In the base of the clock, below the window where the pendulum swung, they found the package. Inside were neatly banded packages of hundred-dollar bills.

Florence Beaufeld stood up, breathing hard. "There's close to a half million dollars here."

"He couldn't risk entering this apartment too many times, so he hid the money in advance. If you hadn't found it, he'd probably have found a way to give you a more obvious hint."

"You mean Dan has been in this apartment?"

Nick nodded. "For the last five Christmas Eves."

"But—"

She was interrupted by the buzzer, and the doorman's voice announced the arrival of Mr. Simpson's car.

"Go on," Nick urged them. "I'll catch you up on the rest later."

It was shortly before midnight when Nick stepped from the shadows near the building and intercepted the man walking quickly toward the entrance. "Larry?"

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The night-security man turned to stare at Nick. "You're the fellow who was asking all those questions."

"That's right. I finally got some answers. You're Dan Beaufeld, aren't you?"

"I—"

"There's no point in denying it. I've seen your picture. You shaved off your moustache, but otherwise you look pretty much the same."

"Where did I slip up? Or was it just the photo?" There was a tone of resignation in his voice.

"There were other things. If Dan Beaufeld was leaving those Christmas gifts himself, he had to have a way into the apartment. A building employee seemed likely in view of the tight security, and one of the security men seemed most likely. There are master keys in the security desk and it would have been easy for you to have one duplicated. The gifts were always left shortly before midnight on Christmas Eve, and that implied someone who might start work on the midnight shift. You couldn't leave your post after midnight. Last night as I was leaving, you told me you'd been here just over four years—enough to cover the last five Christmases. You also said old-timers got the day and evening shifts, yet the day security man told me he's only been here a year. That made me wonder if you preferred the midnight shift so you'd be less likely to be seen and recognized by people who might know you. Of course you spent most of your time in Florida, even before the divorce, and without the moustache it was doubtful any of the other employees or residents would recognize you. On those occasions when Michelle or her mother came in after midnight, you could simply hide your face behind a newspaper or bend down behind the TV monitors."

"I had to be close to her," Dan Beaufeld admitted. "I had to watch my daughter growing up, even if it meant risking arrest. I'd see her going off to school or to parties, watching from across the street, and that was enough. Working here made me feel close to them both. Michelle had a custom of hanging up her Christmas stocking, so I started leaving the gifts every year to let her know I was near and to prepare her for the money she'd get when she turned eighteen.

"I knew the maid let herself out around ten o'clock, and Florence never bothered to relatch the chain lock until bedtime. I entered with my master key, making certain they weren't in the downstairs rooms, and left the gift in the stocking before midnight. Last year I had to come back twice because they were sitting by the fireplace,

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but usually Florence was out at someone's Christmas party and it was all clear."

"Last night you left the money, too—in the grandfather clock."

Beaufeld grinned. "So they read the clues properly."

"It's drug money, isn't it?"

"Some of it, but I'm out of that now. I used some fake ID to start a new life, a clean life."

"Charles Simpson still wants you in prison."

Dan Beaufeld took a deep breath. "Sometimes I think about turning myself in. Some of the crimes are beyond the statute of limitations now, and a lawyer told me that if I surrendered I'd probably get off with a lenient sentence."

"Why don't you talk it over with Florence and Michelle? They don't want your money, they want you. They're waiting up there for you now."

Dan Beaufeld turned his eyes skyward, toward the lighted windows he must have looked at hundreds of times before. "What are *you* getting out of this?" he asked.

Nick Velvet, who had serious doubts about collecting his fee from Charles Simpson, merely answered, "I don't need to get anything out of this one. It's Christmas."

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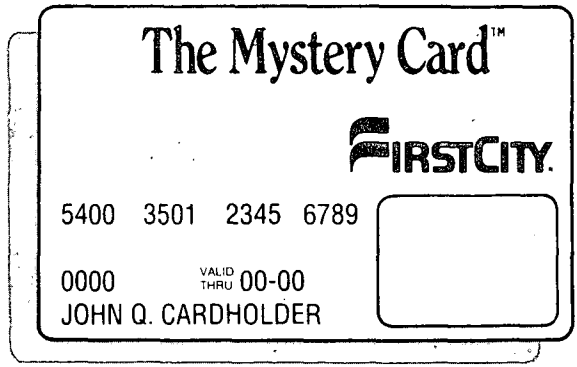

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H. R. F. KEATING

Again, a quote from an H. R. F. Keating cover letter:

"A little story, perhaps to celebrate the 1990 American centenary of the great Holmes—and my apologies for the fearful pun of the title."

All is rejoicefully forgiven, Mr. Keating . . .

A SNAKING SUSPICION

by H. R. F. KEATING

Detective Superintendent Peters called out through his open office door.

"Hey, Sherlock, looks like I've got something for you."

For the umpteenth time in his police career, Detective Inspector Miles Rudge wished he had never, back in his days as a probationary constable in the schoolboyish atmosphere of police college, said in the course of one of the long, rambling, inane conversations they had been apt to have there that his hero was Sherlock Holmes. Why hadn't he picked on a footballer or a pop star like the rest of them? Then the nickname would never have got attached to him and life would have been a lot simpler, however much Sherlock Holmes remained, in secret, his real hero and those marvelous stories stayed at his bedside.

He went into the Super's office and stood in front of the desk.

"Sir?"

"They've got a body over at Clipsham Street. Body in a locked room. Just your style, by the sound of it. It's the wife of a man who runs a shop hiring out creepy-crawlies to TV companies. Been poisoned. They claim. Something quick-acting, and no sign of how it got into her. I daresay the locals have got it all arsy-versy. A locked room, for Pete's sake. But it wants a look-see."

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"Very good, sir. And the name of the establishment?"

Play it straight, Miles told himself. Don't give the old devil the least handle for any more of his Sherlock Holmes cracks.

"Shop called The Speckled Band. Whatever that's supposed to mean."

"It's a Holmes story. One of the best. Terrific."

He could have bitten off his tongue. And the Super was quick to pounce. "Should be right up your street, then, eh? So just nip over there and bring us back the baffling answer."

"I might at that."

He shouldn't have let himself be riled, he knew he shouldn't. But the Super had the knack of getting under his skin, and that stupid boast had come shooting out.

The Super's piggy little eyes gleamed. "Want to bet, Sherlock?"

"Okay. I will."

This was getting worse by the minute, by the second. How could he guarantee to bring back an answer when he didn't know the first thing about the situation?

"Right. What'll it be? A fiver? Or that not fancy enough for Sherlock Holmes?"

"Well, no, not really. Let's make it a bottle of brandy, just like the Great Detective kept in his rooms for fainting clients. A bottle of the best brandy."

"All right. Why not? One bottle of the best brandy if you're not back here with that little matter all wrapped up before I push off home this evening."

Out at the shop with the odd name of The Speckled Band, Miles found the victim was the young wife of the not-so-young proprietor, a man who actually had the same name as Dr. Grimesby Roylott, the villain in the Holmes story. Only he wasn't a doctor and he didn't have that resonant forename. He was simple William Roylott, and he said he had called his shop The Speckled Band because he stocked snakes and someone had told him about the story. But he nevertheless looked as much a villain, if of a lesser breed, than the gigantic Dr. Grimesby Roylott. He was, in fact, thin and stooping and had a dark, unshaven face which seemed twisted in a perpetual slight sneer. And he was quick to make clear what he had felt about his now dead wife.

"Good riddance," he said, darting a challenging glance at Miles. "Bloody bitch. Anything in trousers and she was panting for it."

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Steady, Miles said to himself. Just because the fellow hated his wife and has the same name as the Conan Doyle murderer, it doesn't mean he killed her. Stay cool. Get at the facts.

But the facts, as he began to gather them, did nothing to make the case against William Roylott look any less likely. To begin with, it really did seem as if the murder was, as the Super had stated, a locked-room affair. Even if the room was not the barred and cut-off bedchamber of the Holmes story, but a small and rather sordid bathroom. Yet there could be no doubt that its door had been firmly bolted. The constable, summoned by William Roylott when, he had said, he could not make his wife hear and was afraid she had fainted or something, had had to charge the door three or four times before he had smashed it open. And the little room had no window, just a small ventilator.

When Miles saw the latter, he really began to wonder if he had not slipped into some sort of a time-warp. Dr. Grimesby Roylott had sent a snake, "a swamp adder, the deadliest snake in all India," sliding through a ventilator and down a bell-rope to kill his first victim in her locked room. And in the shop below the flat here, what was there but glass-fronted cage after glass-fronted cage of snakes, along with spiders, huge and furry, and lizards of every hue, tongues flicking and darting.

Certainly, too, William Roylott's wife—she had been decidedly attractive, to judge from her almost naked body—showed every sign of death by poison. And by some substance that, introduced into the bloodstream, acted almost instantaneously. But there was no sign of any sharp object. Nor was there anything to be seen which she could have drunk from. The one tooth-mug was fluffy with old dirt. But it really looked, almost beyond possibility of doubt, that the poison had been administered while she was in this very room, with its locked door and no other means of entry.

The wretched girl had evidently been in the middle of making up her face, half dressed in bra and panties. Her cosmetics were ranged on a shelf in front of the small, brown-stained mirror, together with a cardboard box of cheap costume jewelry. She must, in fact, have been in the act of screwing home her second mock-pearl earring when the snake—

He stopped himself. Come on, Miles, if this Roylott has killed in that way in the hope that no one will cotton on, there's going to be a twin-fanged puncture mark on the body. Find that, and then it'll be time to start thinking about snakes.

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Take care. Don't muck anything about before the scene-of-crime boys get to work. But all the same have a damn good look. If I'm really going to take a bottle of V.S.O.P. brandy off that supercilious bastard, then I'm going to have to cut a few corners.

Making sure the constable who had been on guard at the scene was well out of sight, Miles set to and made a rapid survey of every inch of the dead girl's body. He tweaked away the bra. He lifted up the panties. He parted the mass of blonde hair on her head.

And he found nothing.

He bit his lip in frustration. Of course, it was possible that when old Doc Kynaston came to do the post-mortem he'd find some tiny, almost invisible mark. But a snake bite ought to be more easily seen than that. And, in any case, if this was going to be solved by Forensics, then bang would go his bottle of V.S.O.P.

He pushed himself to his feet, saw that the constable was still standing at the foot of the stairs and that there was no sign yet of the scene-of-crime team. Then he knelt again and repeated his search.

With no better luck.

Yet it must be a snake. It must be.

He stood up wearily. And his eye fell on the ventilator that had first put the notion of a Speckled Band copycat affair into his head. Damn it, when you took a proper look at it, the thing was really too small to let a snake through. It was one of those tinny affairs with a sliding shutter to close it in the coldest weather. It was open now, all right, but the slits in it were surely too narrow to let even the most minute snake squeeze past.

Nevertheless, he went up to it, stood on tiptoe, and peered into the slits. Black. Not a sign of daylight on the far side.

So was it a false affair? Just like in the Speckled Band? Did it lead, in fact, not to the open air but down a small shaft into the shop below? The shop with its collection of possibly deadly reptiles?

He felt in his pocket for the Swiss Army knife he always carried, and with it prised off the ventilator's tinny cover. And there, just a few inches inside, was something completely blocking the hole. Did this mean his theory was wrong? *It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.* The Master's words came back to him with chill clarity. But at least see what it was that was blocking the shaft. It could be some part of this Roylott's plan.

He dug his knife blade in and twisted and tugged. Suddenly whatever it was came away in a shower of brownish debris. It proved to

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be a wad of newspaper. He picked it up from where it had fallen at his feet and glanced at it. There was a date at the top of one of the sheets, a date five whole years earlier. And now, through the hole where the ventilator cover had been, the light of day was plainly to be seen.

So the blockage was no more than something someone had stuffed there long ago to keep out the draught. Foiled again, Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

And the scene-of-crime boys would be here at any moment now—and before long the smirk on the Super's face as he accepted a bottle of fine brandy that he would probably douse with bloody ginger ale.

Miles stood staring miserably down at the body on the floor with the mock-pearl earring the poor girl had been about to put on lying where it had rolled beside her.

And then it came to him, how it had been done. How William Roylott had done it.

He stooped in a flash and reached for the other earring already in the girl's ear. Just in time he stopped himself, dug in his pocket for a handkerchief, and, taking the utmost care, used it while he unscrewed the little pearly object.

And, yes, just as he had thought. There on the earlobe under the small metal pad of the screw-fitting was, not the double puncture mark of a snake bite, but a tiny spot of blood from a single small wound, and on the face of the clamping pad there was a tiny sharp projection, which no doubt the girl's ugly, jealous husband had smeared with the poison.

Detective Inspector Miles Rudge rose to his feet.

He should not have done it. But he could not resist it. As he had entered the Super's office, the man himself had been standing up behind his desk, probably preparing to go home—and early, too. But he had looked somehow just like a barman behind his bar.

Miles had gone up to him.

"Bottle of brandy, my man," he had said. "And make it V.S.O.P."

"Q"

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A Christmas bonus for you: four EQMM "firsts"— #671, 672, 673, and 674. Joseph Leonard is the pseudonym of a resident of Livonia, Michigan—a married registered nurse who is presently working on a mystery novel . . .

THE SWAP

by JOSEPH LEONARD

It was early Tuesday morning, the air already heavy with humidity. I was jogging on the track outside my health club in downtown Detroit. As I neared the fourth turn, I noticed another runner approaching from the other direction, but without my eyeglasses I couldn't make out who it was right away. Then, as he neared, I saw it was Tony Morelli. We first met at the club about six months ago in the locker room. I didn't know much about him, but he seemed pleasant enough. Now he started to run past, turned, and caught up with me. "Hey, Joe!" he said, panting between breaths. "Do you have a minute?"

I plowed to a stop. "Sure, I'm always looking for an excuse to take a break." Thankful for the towel around my neck, I reached up to wipe the perspiration from my face. "What can I do for you?" Being a lawyer, I half expected a request to represent him or someone he knew in a case of some kind. But what he said took me completely by surprise.

"How would you like to swap cars?"

I laughed my confusion and he hurried to explain.

"You've seen my 'sixty-three Corvette around the club. It's in mint condition. I'm the original owner. I know you have a Lincoln town car. I propose we switch."

"Switch?" I still couldn't believe he was serious. "But your car has to be worth a few thousand more than mine at least."

He nodded. "Four thousand. So what do you say? I'm serious."

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"I don't know—" I had seen his car in the parking lot. It was a beauty. But still.

Before I could answer, he continued. "I'm divorcing my wife. I should have done it years ago. Anyway, she's going after everything—the house, the money, the car. But I'm not gonna let her get the car. I'd rather give it away than see her get it." He didn't wait out my hesitation. "Meet me here at seven tomorrow morning. You can look it over then. I'll bring the title and you bring yours."

My instinct told me to think about it for a few days, but he was gone before I knew it.

When I got to my law office I had my paralegal draw up the paperwork. Then I called the mechanic who did maintenance on my Lincoln. He agreed to meet me at the club in the morning to check out the engine on Tony's car.

At 7:00 sharp, the two of us waited in the parking lot. I had wondered whether or not Tony would show, but he did, and he seemed even more anxious to follow through on the deal than he had the day before.

After a thorough inspection, my mechanic closed the hood on the Corvette and walked thoughtfully around the car once more. "If I were you," he said to me under his breath, "I'd grab it before he changes his mind."

An unfamiliar sensation struck me as I studied the car. To follow through on the deal would mean the change I had been looking for—something different. My life had always been very conservative and predictable, from Harvard Law School right down to my correct, capable wife, two handsome kids, and house in the suburbs. What Tony was offering was an adventure. It was spontaneous, crazy.

I looked at him, expectantly awaiting my answer—darkly good-looking, about my height—and I thrust out my hand. "It's a deal."

It took less than five minutes to work out the details. We had both brought the paperwork to cover the legal aspects involved in the switch, which we read eagerly and signed quickly before exchanging keys.

As I drove away, I felt as if I were sixteen again—and proud of myself as well. So cocky, in fact, that I didn't see a dumptruck that pulled out in front of me until the last minute. Turning the wheel sharply to the left, I narrowly missed hitting it broadside. "Watch where you're going!" I yelled at the driver. But my agitation didn't last long. I still felt like I was king of the road . . .

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The following Tuesday, as I left the club, there were two men in the parking lot standing by my car. They wore suits and carried gym bags but I knew I hadn't seen them at the club before. As I approached, they seemed surprised to see me get into the Corvette. I figured their interest was either larcenous or simple admiration.

As I drove down the Lodge Freeway on my way to the office, it suddenly dawned on me that one of the men had looked familiar, and why. He had been driving the dumptruck that had almost run me off the road the week before.

The very next day—Wednesday, one week after my deal with Tony—I was reading the morning paper at breakfast when my coffee cup froze in midair. I stared at the front-page item.

SUSPECTED DRUG DEALER FOUND SLAIN

> Tony Morelli, suspected drug dealer, was found stuffed in the trunk of a Lincoln town car late last night with a single bullet wound to the back of his head. According to police reports, Morelli was the subject of a three-month investigation linking him to major drug dealers in the metro Detroit area. Morelli, single, is survived by two brothers.

I got up and paced the kitchen. The driver of the dumptruck—the one I saw later in the club parking lot. He realized when he saw me get into the Corvette that he had been tricked. He didn't want me. He wanted Morelli. It made sense. Morelli and I were about the same age and height. Our coloring was similar. Morelli needed me—as a double. By switching cars, he'd hoped they'd mistake me for him.

That was five years ago. I still have that sweet little Corvette. I look at it whenever I get the urge to do something else impulsive. I can't sell it and I don't drive it. I just keep it as a reminder. Because every now and then I get a feeling that there's a new challenge or adventure begging to be explored—and I'm tempted. But then I remember Tony Morelli.

"Q"

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Sharon Pisacreta is an archaeologist currently teaching ancient history in Detroit. "I seem," she says, "to divide the rest of my time between freelance writing and relocating every other year to New York City. This particular story was the result of an uncomfortable month spent in Athens during a heat wave. As you can see, weeks of 100° weather are likely to inspire rather murderous thoughts."

In the form of "les amusements dangereuses" . . .

A TASTE FOR FOXGLOVE

by SHARON PISACRETA

Only bamboo chairs, baking under a punishing sun, were in evidence on the hotel roof at noon. Except for an occasional tourist intent on acquiring a tan at any cost, no one was foolish enough to sit out here in the middle of the day. Most foreigners in Athens quickly learned that during August one took shelter at midday—lying in hotel rooms in their underwear or sipping ouzo at the Laikon Bar and talking with Costas, the bartender, waiting for dusk, for a bit of shade and maybe a breeze blowing in from the harbor before venturing out to Plaka or Constitution Square or Piraeus.

The man who now walked onto the roof did so with cool indifference, as only a Frenchman of a certain age could do. As expected, all the chairs were unoccupied. He settled into one, wincing as the hot cane seared his bare legs. For the past week in Athens, the hotel roof had been his refuge, his only solace in an inferno. Here he could be alone for a while, gazing at the Parthenon shimmering in the heat across the city, its parched ruins clearly visible from his vantage point, or he could read, as he intended to now, a paperback copy of *Plexus,* already open in his hands.

It seemed only an hour had gone by, but he had read too much for such a short time to have elapsed. At any rate, his afternoon of quiet

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was at an end. Without turning around, he knew that she was there, her lavish perfume invading the hot, still air around him. Fortunately, she always drenched herself in fragrance—it gave away her presence, she who moved soundlessly like a wary jungle cat, no jangling bracelets on her wrists, no clacking beads about her neck, and invariably barefoot (an irritating American habit he had not been able to break her of). Yes, she was certainly barefoot now—silent, so silent—but her scent gave her away.

At first, he didn't move. He would let her think she had the advantage, that she could stand back smugly and observe him, watching him squint in the sunlight while trying to read and rub his forehead free of sweat. But after a few minutes he grew tired of the game, tired and angry at having to wait anxiously in this heat, helpless and exposed to the merciless Greek sky and her. How long must the game go on? How long would the fear and doubt continue? And at the last, his courage failed, his back damp with the heat and his own despicable fear. The pages of his book blurred before him. Why must she linger? To savor the moment or to work up her nerve?

There was the sound of movement behind him, running feet hitting the burning cement, a swish of fabric, and the overwhelming fragrance. Just before her hands closed on his neck, he let out a short cry, instantly regretted. Her laughter rang out full and loud on the deserted roof and his humiliation was complete as her hands fell away, leaving him safe and alive—this time.

Back in their room, he refused to talk to her. Instead, he squashed himself into the tiny bathtub and frantically scraped away the sweat and the peeling flakes of sunburned skin that covered him. It was madness to have stayed in a hotel without air conditioning. How could he sleep in such heat, how could he relax and stretch out and uncoil?

The bathroom door opened and she looked in at him, amused as always by the sight. "Lucien, I'm going out to see if I can buy some fruit," she said, smiling. "I have this incredible craving for grapes. I feel positively Dionysian."

With that, she was gone, while Lucien slumped back in the tub. He would never have believed it, but he felt as spent as an exhausted animal. He was so sorry he had started this whole thing, sorry he had aroused a once sleepy and contented woman, sorry he had taken the first step, sorry, so sorry, that he had ever tried to kill his wife.

But so many things had changed in the past twenty-six years. He

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wasn't the aspiring medical student any more, and she was no longer the young American coed who had spent her summers painting in France. Then her dreaminess and passive sensuality had held a certain charm for him. The fact that her father was the fast-food king of a chain of American restaurants had held a certain charm as well. But Lucien was an easily bored man—he should have remembered that before he married her and began to flood France with Uncle Chester's Chicken restaurants.

For soon enough he was bored. Bored with medical school, bored with the chicken franchises, bored with domestic life in the suburbs of Paris, bored with their three quiet children, even bored by the succession of women he (or his new wealth) had attracted. But, above all, he was bored with her, with Anne, his American wife, so calm and lazy, so confident, so disdainful of the French and Frenchmen, so unsophisticated and easy to manipulate. Divorce was out of the question—there was simply too much money involved and, as one of the newly rich, one wished to climb up the social ladder as unobtrusively as possible.

Still, he might not have attempted such a thing had there not been that redheaded woman from Lyons he hadn't yet grown tired of, who had insisted—threatened actually—that he must end the marriage or he would see no more of her. Oh, the mesmerizing control that infernal woman had exerted over him for a time—Lucien blushed to recall it. It now seemed almost unbelievable to him that while on holiday in Sardinia, he had actually tried to kill his wife. It had been an absurd thing to do, but he had been so restless. And of course it had failed.

Lucien also had to admit in retrospect that choosing the dried leaves of the *Digitalis purpurea,* otherwise known as foxglove, had been a rather idiotic and fanciful way to go about it. Maybe it was his memories of medical school that had compelled him—he had always loved studying toxicology. At any rate, he had measured out the necessary grains and mixed it in her orange juice. Anne normally gulped down her morning juice so quickly that the glass would be immediately drained.

But he was just too fine, too good. When the nausea and vomiting started, the irregular pulse, the dizziness, the pain in the abdomen, Lucien, the ex-medical student, found he was unable to go through with it. Instead, he drove his stricken wife eighty kilometres to the nearest private clinic and sat trembling in the corridor while they pumped her stomach.

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And when he was finally allowed to see her, and he beheld her so pale and ill, so defenseless in the white bed, he did the maddest thing yet in a holiday already filled with folly. He told her the truth, shamefully whispering his confession while she listened without expression.

"Why didn't you just ask for a divorce?" she asked calmly, as though he were a stupid child. "I would gladly have given you one."

Lucien didn't know how to answer her. How could he tell her about the woman from Lyons and his fear of scandal and his reluctance to part with any of the Uncle Chester's Chicken money? How could he allow himself to appear even more contemptible than he already had? Besides, he was a little offended at the readiness with which Anne seemed to embrace the idea of leaving him. He had never imagined that she might be as weary of him as he was of her. If the circumstances were different, he might even have worked up a little anger. But the time was not right.

"Well, do you want a divorce?" There was no carelessness to her voice at that moment, only a firm timbre that signaled a decision had been made.

Choking back tears and shaking his head violently, he started to break down as only a severely controlled person could.

"Well, I think it would be a great mistake," she murmured, staring out the window for a moment, as though she were examining something in her mind. Lucien kept imagining the sound of a Sardinian police siren coming for him. "It wouldn't be fair, would it? After all, you've had your chance. Now it's my turn."

"What?" Lucien whispered, not sure he had heard correctly.

"It's my turn now," Anne replied, actually smiling. "You tried to murder me and you failed. Don't you think I deserve a chance to even the score?"

"What are you saying?"

Too weak to pull herself up, Anne simply lay back against the pillows, looking strangely at him for several moments. "Do you think you're the only one in this marriage who's bored?" she asked venomously. "Twenty-four years living in France—that's enough to drive anyone over the edge. But twenty-four years married to a man who smells of sour pork, who spits phlegm on city sidewalks, who can only sleep on his left side in complete darkness, who chooses the coarsest and most money-hungry women to be his mistresses, who refuses to speak English properly—" For someone who had just been poisoned, there was a lot of life left in her, Lucien thought with

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amazement as she paused for breath. "If it hadn't been for the children, who unaccountably love you, I would have swum across the Atlantic to get away from you!"

"Anne!"

"And you have the nerve to try and kill me?" she accused, her voice thick with anger. "My God, only a Frenchman could be so arrogant, so in love with himself! Well, this marriage doesn't end until *I* have *my* chance."

"I really don't understand what you're saying."

"I'll go along with whatever lie you've told these doctors," she went on. "I'll tell them about mixing up my medication or whatever *merde* you've handed them. What *did* you tell them, by the way?"

"That you like to make new herbal teas and you accidentally picked the wrong herb—"

Anne looked at him with such scorn that his voice trailed off.

"I'll go along with that story since I'm sure they aren't going to take your word for it. And I won't tell the police the truth, either. Unless you refuse to do as I ask."

It occurred to him that perhaps he should have put more foxglove in her juice.

"I may take precautions, though," she continued, pleased by the nervous expression on his face. "Maybe I'll leave a sealed letter for Father, explaining what you've tried to do today, with instructions 'to be opened in case of my death.' Or I may keep it our secret. But you'll never know if you play the game. In fact, there isn't much left for you to do once you agree to it. Your role in the game is simply to wait."

"Wait?"

"Wait and do nothing," she stated. "Wait the month, the year, or years before *I* try to kill *you*." As weak as she was, Lucien heard the grim excitement in her voice. "I may fool you, tease you even. I may let you think I'm about to murder you, but you'll be wrong. When my real attempt comes, it will be terrible and shocking, like foxglove in a glass of orange juice. And if my serious attempt fails, then the ball will be back in your court, the next move will be yours. It will be your choice as to what should happen next. Divorce? Truce? Or another round by the same rules. You can even try to murder me again."

It was only then that Lucien finally began to cry. What a relief! There would be no scandal, no prison, no humiliating exposure. Only a few amateurish attempts to kill him by a woman who was too

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inattentive for a hand of canasta, a woman who made up her own rules for chess because she kept forgetting how it was played, a woman who had lost more than one game of croquet because she was too lazy to even cheat. A woman who, like most women, would lose this game before it ever began.

But he was wrong.

In two years, he had grown old. Even though he was not yet fifty, he walked with a painful shuffle. Listless, indifferent. The constant anxiety and unpredictability were eating away at him, sapping what little energy he had left. The family business suffered, he had no mistress, and he was violently bitter over the most unexpected turn of events: he had fallen in love—again—with Anne.

For while these two years had shattered him, Anne had flourished. She was more beautiful than he had ever remembered her—radiant, full of appetite and curiosity. She had even started painting again. Her brush with death had stirred her awake, setting her on a new course, so that at forty-six, she was emerging strong, sure, and magnificent. Life was so rich for her, so exciting, robust, and sensual she put her husband and three pale children to shame.

And above all she loved the game. It sharpened her wits and gave her discipline. It was a delightful, dangerous time, and she was resourceful and clever at making Lucien think that this was it, *this* was the real attempt. She would watch him worry and try to hide his concern, watch him inevitably succumb to his fear, and then witness his quiet relief when he realized that, no, she didn't mean it this time, not just yet, it had been just another false alarm. It was as though she had developed a taste for foxglove, a craving for danger and the deadly charms of poison.

How many times had she hinted at cyanide in the roast, gas leaks in the kitchen, faulty brakes in the Renault? And how many times had he believed her just enough to wear down his arrogance, his once certain belief that she would never really do it, that she didn't really want to do it because she must be as drawn to him as he now was to her.

For he *was* drawn to her, he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman, even that barbarous woman from Lyons. He was even more in love with her than when he had first started his seduction so long ago of that very young and appetizing Anne with her lazy laughter and long dark hair. Oh, yes, this was a game she was playing all too well.

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The trip to Greece had been his idea. Their last holiday had ended with foxglove and the clinic. Lucien wanted to be alone with her. He wanted to regain his lost advantage. He wanted the game over with and beautiful, exciting Anne at his side again, her surrender as complete as his.

But Athens was a mistake. He knew that even before the little rooftop scene. It was too hot and white, too filled with cars and tourists, with intense, shouting people and the remains of ancient passions. Crowds and cities only seemed to stimulate Anne. If they stayed in the city, he sensed she would make another mock attempt on his life. He was beginning to believe that she took too much pleasure in teasing him to ever really kill him. It had been two years, after all. Two years! She hadn't murdered him yet and she had had no lack of opportunity.

Yes, it was the stalking and the planning that she probably thrived upon, savoring his quiet discomfort and slowly dying confidence. She liked the pursuit—hunting him down, watching him tremble—but she would not have the stomach for the kill. Not Anne.

But by the time she discovered that for herself, he might be dead from the sheer, unrelenting stress. No, something had to be done. She had loved him once. And she must still. After all, he had tried to do away with her and she hadn't turned him in or left him or finally taken her gruesome revenge. Lying there in the tub, Lucien thought, two years, *mon dieu!* He would not allow them to leave Greece until this thing was settled once and for all. After all, the pangs of guilt only stretched so far. Enough was enough.

With what little energy he had left, Lucien decided that he must take charge again. He would court her as he had long ago in Paris. Seduce her, plead with her like a medieval troubadour, caress her under the Aegean night sky, whisper of his ardor, his hopeless passion, his overwhelming need to feel that she had forgiven him, that they could once again nestle in each other's arms without either one of them having to peer over a shoulder in wary expectation of a dagger or a hired assassin. He would exert himself as though his life depended upon it—since, in fact, it did.

When she returned with the grapes, he was dressed in white cotton trousers and an open-necked shirt, his dark tan in sharp contrast against his clothing. He was ready to charm, to take control, his weariness and indifference noticeably absent. Anne seemed sur-

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prised at the change—but pleased as well, Lucien thought. He would never allow her to see him frightened again.

The holiday was almost over. He had to press his advantage now. "Get dressed, Anne," he said in melodious French. "It's getting late and we're going dancing."

Somehow it didn't surprise him when she obeyed him without even a sarcastic smile.

It had gone well. Anne had always loved to dance. Slender and graceful, she moved with her eyes closed, oblivious to anything around her, concentrating only on the music. Tonight she had danced barefoot at a club in Plaka and more than one man had followed her with his eyes. It was all Lucien could do to prevent himself from kneeling before her as the bouzoukis started another song and she tossed her hair back over her shoulder. She was softening, she was receptive. She had leaned against him all night, letting him do all the talking, dancing only when he wanted to dance, eating only the foods that he had chosen to order. Like the old days, only both of them were so much wiser.

And now they were back at the hotel, too keyed up to go in to bed. The air was heavy and the sidewalk hot beneath their sandals. Lucien suggested they take the elevator up to the roof, where they could talk looking out over the lights of Athens, where they could be alone, where he would make himself vulnerable for the last time.

Anne pressed the eleventh-floor button in the elevator.

"Let me stop first and wash my face," she said agreeably. "I've danced so much tonight, I'm drenched. I must look like an exhausted peasant."

"You're stunning," Lucien said quietly.

She smiled and stepped out at their floor. He didn't join her. "I'm going on up," he said. She nodded and the elevator doors closed between them.

It was dark and deserted on the roof. Without a moon to shed any light, Lucien stumbled onto a bamboo chair and bruised his shin. Yes, he thought, looking out over the city, let her follow me here to a dangerous place where I wait alone, where if she really wants to kill me it will have to be now—or, letter or no letter to Papa, Lucien would leave her and that would be an ending almost as final as death.

He gazed out at the darkened Acropolis, at the street far below,

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at the hotel balconies where an occasional couple stood very close before they wandered back into their rooms.

There was a swish of crepe. That lush strong scent. Almost instinctively he stiffened, and then he thought, No, not this time. He felt her standing behind him.

"Anne?"

"Yes," she said softly. He could hear uncertainty in her voice.

He stepped close to the railing and turned to face her. God, she was beautiful. Like a willing victim, a sacrifice to her righteous magnificence, Lucien let her see how helpless he was before her. He beckoned.

"If you want to do it, I will not struggle," he whispered softly.

"Yes," she whispered back. And then was silent.

"And do you know why, Anne?" he said as he turned his back on her, feeling the railing against his belly, seeing the long drop down, sensing that the time was right for such a risk. "Go on, my wild one, kill me if you want. Have it over and done with finally if it's what you truly want."

She said nothing.

Lucien went on, as if he were addressing the wind. "But I don't think it's what you really want, Anne. I think you want what I've wanted for so long now. I—"

He never finished the sentence, for he was pushed with ferocious force over the edge of the perilous railing. For a fleeting, horrifying second, he couldn't believe it had actually happened—my God, my God!

The fifteenth-floor balcony broke his fall. His hurtling body struck wicker chairs and concrete, luckily missed a glass table. He had fallen onto the terrace where continental breakfast was served two floors below. Only two floors—but the pain! He felt as though he were losing consciousness. And his body was twisted somehow. He couldn't be hurt as badly as it seemed. He couldn't be dying—not him, not now. He had to live to put an end to the game, to live happily with her again. If only he could manage to shout before he lost consciousness. He had to draw someone there, he had to be rescued—he mustn't die.

A door creaked open and light spilled in, then darkness as the door quickly shut again. "Oh, help, help me, please," he cried weakly. "I'm hurt. Please call an ambulance. Please."

As soon as he smelled that powerful fragrance, however, he

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stopped pleading. It was Anne, standing barefoot over him in her black-crepe dress, holding something large and heavy in her hands. She was so quiet. The game was really over. And he had only himself to blame. You Gallic imbecile, he thought in despair as darkness closed in on him. How could he have forgotten that women never play fair?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Hic iacet Lyman "Stripes" McPhee,
A venal football referee,
Who to his everlasting shame
Was bribed to throw a crucial game—
A game hard-fought on either side.
With a minute left, the score was tied,
When a long, high "bomb" was seen to wend
Its spiral way to a loose tight end,
Who caught the ball and made it his own,
Then did a dance in the foe's end zone.
"Touchdown!" fans of the winner cried.
"#$**!" the losing fans replied.
But wait! What's this? The referee
Has assessed a holding penalty!
And then—oh, woe! alas, alack!—
He called the winning touchdown back.
Whereat the tight end's team went ape
And the referee could not escape.
No fairy tale could be absurder
Than eleven giants charged with murder,
And yet here lies the murderee—
The football referee, McPhee.

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Their clothes, their pallor, the faint tones of their speech indicated Appalachian coal country, deep-poverty belt. Their bad teeth were noticeable even from thirty feet away. Her long, very blonde hair, parted in the middle, revealed black roots. Prison guards would tell you it's the prevailing style on visitors' day. Twenty years old at the outside, she had that worn-out madonna look that comes with a second child before your sixteenth birthday.

M. W. Keiper is a former newspaper reporter and although he (?) only recently began writing fiction and has completed only five short stories so far, two have been chosen for runner-up awards in national-level competitions and he (?) was first-place winner in this year's Florida State Writing Competition, literary category. "Stand Like a Lion" goes a long way in explaining such quick recognition . . .

STAND LIKE A LION

by M. W. KEIPER

He must have really loved her. He could have held onto her, used her as a shield, but when he drew he pushed her away hard. She staggered and slid for about ten feet before she fell in front of the video-arcade entrance.

I'd been leaning against a waist-high planter box in front of the multi-cinema. The box was full of plastic ferns and stunted palms. Welcome to sunny Daytona Beach. The two of them came out of the Zayre's that dead-ends the mall between the arcade and theaters.

It was the gold and the clothes that caught my eye—jeans jacket and well worn brown corduroy pants, heavy black engineer's boots. Not exactly native attire, or your standard vacation wardrobe. A heavy-looking gold wristwatch he couldn't keep from shooting looks at, an equally heavy-looking nugget-style ring on his right hand. Ditto the lighter he produced for their cigarettes.

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I stood idly cataloguing them as they drifted toward the floor-to-ceiling glass panels fronting the arcade: the clothes, their pallor, the faint tones of their speech penetrating the low-level mall din. Appalachian coal country, deep-poverty belt. Both sets of bad teeth noticeable even from thirty feet away; her long, very blonde hair, parted in the middle, revealing black roots—prison guards will tell you it's the prevailing style on visitors' day. They call it "hillbilly blonde." Twenty years old at the outside, she had that worn-out madonna look that comes with a second child before your sixteenth birthday.

Him—all that new gold and those shabby clothes. Not just walking, swaggering. Smiling down at his lady, hugging her around the shoulder and walking proud. Probably just off the interstate. Time to shop for new clothes—pick out anything you want, darlin'. The stop at the jewelry store must have come first. I figured it like this: Out of the joint maybe a month. He takes down a good score, then it's time for a vacation. Florida's so far away, who'd look for him there?

Then he caught me watching and it all came apart. He looked me in the eye and he knew I'd made him. In the same instant I knew what he was going to do.

Oh, no, I wanted to scream at him, don't! It's a mistake—I didn't mean anything!

Too late.

His gun was tucked under his belt on his left side, butt forward. As he pushed her away with his left hand, his right hand went across for the piece.

The big double-action automatic was in a belt-holster on my right hip. Just luck my coat was unbuttoned. I rocked forward, away from the planter, and dropped to my right knee, bringing my left hand up to brace the gun in my right. It was going to be close.

I thought we fired at about the same time. But I'd gotten there first. The white dot of the Sig nightsight was centered on his chest. The .357 slug from his revolver whipped by at least a foot away from my right ear. There was a wet, cracking thud, audible even through the blasts, as the hollow-point .45 bullet hit him three inches left of the solar plexus. Tall and gangling, he whipped backward as if someone had taken him by the back of the belt and jerked hard. Before he could fall, the second slug caught him two inches lower and kicked him back another couple of feet. He hit the floor face-up, limp, unmoving.

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There is no silence on earth more profound than the silence that follows gunfire. The first sound was hysterical weeping from behind me. A cluster of high-school girls from the movie line. They were huddled on the floor in front of the ticket counter. The crying came from somewhere in the middle. Then it was the girl friend, screaming his name, making a siren of it. She rocked back and forth on her knees. "Bah-bee! Bah-bee!"

There's a shock to finding yourself still alive. The climb to my feet was like a ride up in an elevator. I felt light-headed and unsteady. Sounds had a tinny, faraway quality. The walk to the body seemed like miles.

By one of those flukes, he lay there in fairly good order. Feet nearly together, arms almost casually at his side. He looked like someone who'd gotten tired and lay down on the floor for a nap. There wasn't even much blood. Without a heartbeat, there's almost no bleeding. The pair of heavy slugs must have stopped his heart instantly. Likely he was dead before he hit the floor.

It was the face that told the truth—eyes wide, mouth half open in shock. Altogether it was a look of amazement. I'd seen it before. Nothing seems to surprise these guys more than stopping one themselves.

Just then the mall rent-a-cop comes hustling up. He motions me away from the body. In his haste to take charge, he doesn't notice the gun in my hand. When he does, he goes deathly pale.

It's funny to watch, it really is. His hand twitches toward and away from his holster four or five times rapidly. He's searching deep inside himself for the courage to go for it and try to arrest me. The search is in vain. Finally, I decide to put him out of his misery. I reach into my left jacket pocket and pull out my badge and I.D. I've never seen a more grateful look.

The uniformed sergeant is in very good humor. He's laughing and kidding around with the evac ambulance crew. Every once in a while he spins the dead man's pistol by the trigger guard. I know the gun is safe—I saw him empty the remaining rounds into an evidence envelope—but it's still annoying as hell to watch.

At last, as they cart out the body, he turns and heads my way, still spinning the goddamn gun.

"Howdy, Sheriff—y'all do trick ropin', too?"

His grin just gets broader. Whatever the reason for it, his good

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mood appears immune to sarcasm. "I understand you're some kind of cop?"

I hand him the small leather wallet that holds my shield and I.D. He doesn't just glance at it, he reads it.

"U.S. Marshal's Service?"

"Out of the Orlando office."

"You on the job?"

"No, I was just going to the movies."

"What started it?"

"He was just hinky. Made me for a cop who'd made him. He's good for something major, has to be."

"Yeah, it's weird but it happens. Two F.B.I. guys from Jacksonville got it that way a couple of years ago. Over on the west side, near DeLand—that's the county seat up here. They go in this little place for breakfast and there's some fugitive doper in there. They don't even notice him. He pops up and empties a .forty-five at 'em."

"How soon will the detectives get here?" It's been almost an hour. The first cop was here in less than five minutes, the sarge was only a few minutes behind him. He puts on this blatantly false look of intense concentration, like he's really puzzling it out.

"Detectives? Detectives? Oh!" His face suddenly brightens with mock revelation. "You mean those guys in suits? Real pushy? Ask a lot of questions? No, no, we call 'em criminal investigators now. No, only us grunts work night shift. The suits are all snug-a-bye in their beddies. If it makes you feel any better, I'm the deputy shift commander."

Old sarge thinks he's just a riot, sarge does. Still, in spite of myself, I'm beginning to like what he uses for style.

"So what do we do now?" I figured to spend most of the night in a claustrophobic, airless interrogation room.

"We? Well, I go back to the station and do the shift commander's paperwork while he coops on the couch. You come in about ten tomorrow, talk to the suits, and pick up your medal."

There's nothing to do but play along.

"Medal?"

"Yeah, at least. Should have been a bounty on the scumbag—sorry, ex-scumbag. Guy's a parole violator from West Virginia. Out about two months. Quit his job the third week, hasn't seen his parole officer since."

"Half the guys on parole don't report." Just standing here, faint

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tremors are starting to run down the nerves in my arms and legs. Shock is either wearing off or just setting in.

"We got an NCIC on this guy yesterday. Cops up there like him for a grocery-store stickup Friday. Place cashes a lot of paychecks. The perp got better than twenty-five G's. His old lady worked there as a cashier. She didn't show Friday. But here's the clincher."

He held up the gun, broke open the cylinder, and thumbed it closed again. Then he dry-fired it a couple of times. Each click of the hammer sent little razor blades chasing down my spine.

"Numbers say this piece belongs to a West Virginia state trooper named Thompson. Early Saturday morning they found him dead on the road in front of his patrol car. Shot in the left eye with a .22. It's a good bet the poor bastard pulled Bonnie and Clyde here over on a traffic stop. Make you feel some better?"

"Some." It didn't. Not now. Maybe it would later. Right now it was just words. The corpse was real. That it might have been me was real.

"Good. Hate to have you think you got a mug so ugly people just shoot on sight. —You're a hell of a shot. Two in the pump at better'n ten yards. There's them that'd say you put just one .forty-five through a man's heart, you've done enough for him."

"I'm an overachiever."

He liked that. A good, solid macho-cop kind of an answer. How could I tell him? How do you explain the kind of fear that makes you shoot a man you know you've already killed. We stood there and bullshitted for a while. What kind of ———s the suits were, what kind of ———s civilians were, that kind of thing.

As we talked, the Brink's guard comes out of Zayre's, a canvas bag in either hand. Done with his collection route, he'd head for the short side of the corridor leading to the public restrooms. His passkey would let him out the fire door at the end. Management didn't want them using the regular entrances. Seemed like a bad idea to me. Somebody could lay for him in that hall, mace him or slug him, walk with the money, and be long gone before his partner in the truck ever suspected something was wrong.

Sarge had changed the topic again. Now we were on "guys I have seen blown up." Something he said, some bit of gore, triggered it, made it all come welling up. Before I could catch myself, it spilled out.

"I was shot. I'm on extended medical leave."

They didn't even want me—they wanted him, the pilot. They just

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didn't want to chance any interference. At first, my left wrist hurt more than the wounds. The handcuff cut right to the bone as he tried to run, dragging me along. Then his face turned to blood and the pressure on my wrist stopped. Then the burn started. The deep, through-and-through burn that can't be mistaken for anything else.

"They whacked the prisoner I was transporting. A couple of professionals, right in O'Hare Airport. He was a Fed witness, pilot for some coke outfit. They put four nine-millimeters in my back first."

"Hell, that was you? I heard about that. What was that, about six months ago?"

"Four."

"Goddamn. Never got 'em, did they?"

"No, they were pros."

"Well, hell, you seem to be doin' all right. Ain't slowed you down none."

"I'm being retired. I'm thirty-four years old and they're retiring me with a disability pension. Doctors say my spine has been 'compromised.' Inoperable fragments in two places."

"Goddamn, buddy! I'm sorry to hear that!" He seems nervous now, not looking at me directly and shuffling his feet. It's like he suddenly found out he was talking to someone with a terminal disease. To him maybe it was. Forced retirement is something a hard-core cop fears as much as cancer.

"Well, I'll let you get goin'. I gotta keep your piece until you make your statement tomorrow. That's S.O.P., even for one of my own guys. You okay?"

"Yeah. No problem."

I sit here in the car, trying to breathe slow and steady. It doesn't help, the shakes have got me now. I reach into my right coat pocket and take out the tightly rolled latex Halloween mask and the can of mace. I toss them onto the passenger-side floor mat. The pair of folded department-store shopping bags are fixed under the left side of my coat with double-sided tape. I add them to the pile on the floor.

When my hands stop shaking, I start the car. The radio blares on. It is one of those clear-channel Carolina stations. Country all day, then rented out to a local Jesus shouter after sundown. Someone is screaming brimstone. "There is a path! There is a time! There is a judgment! Though the wicked flee where no man pursueth! Yet the righteous stand like a lion!"

The knob comes off in my hand.

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The place is a big log-cabin-style building. A lawn the size of most city parks—obviously professionally manicured. A pool inside of one of those bubble things. And a view of the plains that goes on forever, which is why they'd sprung for a big picture window in the front of the house. The only thing that indicated it might be a church was a sign on the mailbox that said ULTIMATE CHURCH, ET AL.

Et al.?

All we know about Al H. Malone is that he is a resident of Colorado, he is using a pseudonym, and this is his first professionally published fiction . . .

I HATE IT WHEN THEY DO THAT

By AL H. MALONE

I guess I'm sort of a detective. The fact that the bad guys I deal with are only tax evaders doesn't make them any less criminal. And there *are* victims—after all, for every successful tax evasion, you and I pay Uncle Sam a little more to make up for it.

I'm an Exemptions Investigator for the State Property Tax Commission, and what I do is review requests for property-tax exemption. Most—probably 99 percent—of the organizations I deal with are honest, deserving churches and charities that need a little help from the government to stay in operation. But, oh, that one percent!

Like the other day, I get assigned to work on the Ultimate Church, a nonprofit corporation—or so their application says. Only, when I call the Secretary of State's office, this "church" has never registered. This wouldn't normally be any big deal, since churches aren't required to incorporate, but it does get me suspicious. If they'd lie about a little thing like that, what else might they be lying about?

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I make out a request form so that I can take a drive out to investigate. (If it'll make you feel any better, I've never understood why the government requires so much paperwork, either. I've got to fill out requisitions to *get* acquisitions and *then* fill out another form to account for the time I spent filling the forms out.)

Anyway, the car I draw is one of those State specials. No clutch, no speedometer, and the brakes only work if I'm doing five miles an hour. I drive by way of back roads, so I don't risk running into car trouble in heavy traffic.

My first stop is the county assessor's office to check their records. The first thing I discover is that the property is shown as owned by one Sherley Schwartz. The application lists a Bishop S. Schwartz as the church's pastor, but it says that the property is owned by Ultimate Church. That's an important discrepancy to a pen-fiddler like me. I talk to a clerk—a pretty girl with long red hair and blue eyes you could swim in—and she promises to go back through the county records and see what she can find out.

The assessor's map shows that the church is located way up on a dirt road twenty miles away and the clerk tells me the road is pretty hilly. I borrow a phone to let the church know I'm on my way out, half hoping that maybe some good Samaritan out there will be willing to come get me because I figure the car isn't up to the drive.

"Hello?" A lady answers, and I'm momentarily confused. Churches are like businesses—they generally answer the phone by giving the name of the organization. I check the phone number on the application form, but I dialed right.

"Is this Ultimate Church?"

The lady giggles. "It sure is. What can I do for you?"

"My name is Carl Robbins—"

"You don't have to tell me that." She giggles again.

This conversation is definitely confusing. "What don't I have to tell you?"

"Your name. We don't go by names here."

"Uh—okay. I work with the Division—"

"You don't have to tell me that, either."

"But—"

"It's okay. We trust you." She giggles again. "If you trust us."

I'm starting to wonder if I woke up on the wrong side of the planet. "All right. I trust you. Listen, I was wondering if I could come up there today to see the property."

"See the property? That's original. What time?"

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"Well, I'm sort of in a hurry—I have to get back to the office. Are you open right now?"

"We're always open—come by any time, we'll be sure to have someone available for you."

"Okay. Uh, I also need a favor, if you don't mind."

You can almost hear her smile on the phone. "Favors are our specialty. What can we do for you?"

"Can you send somebody down to pick me up?"

"Sorry," she says, her voice still all smiles, "we don't do takeout. Can't you get a cab or something?"

Takeout? Now *this* is weird. "Listen, ma'am, I have a State car, but I'm just not sure it'll get me up there—and if I take a cab I'll have to pay for it out of my own pocket. But I do have to come see the property. I was just hoping someone out there might be willing—"

All of a sudden, her voice is hard as rock. "Now just hold on there. What are we talking about?"

Now I finally get it. I should have known that we weren't talking about the same thing. She probably thought I was somebody else. I take a deep breath and start over. "Your application for property-tax exemption. My name is Carl Robbins, and I work for the State—"

"I'm sorry," she says, frosty as winter in Alaska, "I can't help you."

Then she hangs up!

So much for good Samaritans. Well, at least they know I'm coming. Hopefully, if I don't make it within a reasonable amount of time, they'll come looking for me.

God deserves a pat on the back. (I'm not supposed to say things like that in my job—people might think my religious preference would prejudice me against other beliefs.) The car gets me there and only stalls once.

The place is a big log-cabin-style building, and from what I can see it has all the amenities. A lawn the size of most city parks—obviously professionally manicured. A pool inside one of those bubble things. And a view of the plains that goes on forever, which is why they'd sprung for a big picture window in the front of the house.

The only thing that indicates this might be a church is a sign on the mailbox that says ULTIMATE CHURCH, ET AL. Et al.? I check the application form. It says that the property is used as a combination church/rectory. Maybe the pastor is the "al."

I stop at the entrance to the driveway and take a few pictures for

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the file, then measure off the boundaries to be sure I have the right place. Then I go up and knock on the door.

A lady answers, dressed in one of those frilly bathrobes that isn't supposed to hide anything, and so, naturally, doesn't. I quickly avert my eyes, feeling as though I must have walked in on something very unchurchlike. I thought the lady said they were open today.

"Well, don't be shy, mister. You can come in. We don't bite—I promise." I can tell by her voice that this is not the same woman who answered the phone.

"I'd, uh, rather stay out here until you're dressed," I tell her. "I'm here to inspect the place for your property-tax exemption." Without looking, I try to hand her one of my cards, but she moves out of reach and pulls the door partway closed.

When she speaks again, her voice has a nasty tone. "Listen, mister. I don't have anything to say to you right now. You just go away and don't come back without an appointment."

I've never been asked to make an appointment to see a church before—but then obviously this isn't a run-of-the-mill church. "I'm sorry. I did call ahead to see if somebody could bring me up, but the woman I spoke with hung up on me."

"Good for her," the woman snaps. "You can't just pull a surprise visit and expect to be welcomed with open arms. You just go away and come back, say, on Tuesday morning." She starts to shut the door.

I put my hand on the door to stop her and try to look abashed. "I'm sorry, but I can't make an appointment more than a few hours in advance. I was told you were open today and I let someone here know I was coming, so if you can't play along I won't be able to come back. I'll just have to recommend denial of your application. It's office policy."

"Why?" She opens the door a little. "You've come at an inconvenient time—that's not *my* fault."

"Well, it's sort of like I'm the health inspector at a restaurant. It doesn't mean much to inspect the place if I've let you know I'm coming way in advance."

The lady gives a "humph" that says I've offended her dignity. "Are you implying that we'd lie or put on an act?"

"I'm just saying that's my office's policy."

"Well, I don't like being ambushed. You aren't welcome here and I'm going to have a talk with your supervisor." She adds a few choice words that are not worthy of reporting.

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I slip my card through the crack in the door and let go. "Her name's on the card, just below mine."

The door slams shut.

Sure enough, the car breaks down on the way back to town. Obviously, the lady back at the church isn't going to let me use the phone, and the only other choice I have is to walk back to town, since the church was the only building on this road. Fortunately, it's a nice day for a walk.

On the way, I'm passed by quite a number of cars, all driven by men. After about the third, that phone conversation begins to make sense to me. (All right, so I'm a little slow on the uptake—but then this kind of thing isn't exactly my realm of expertise.)

It only takes about an hour to get back to town. I find a service station, phone the office, and request authorization for a tow truck. While I'm waiting for them to bring the car down, I make another phone call.

"Hello?" It's the same woman who answered the door.

I hope she doesn't recognize my voice. "I'm sort of feeling lonely today."

"Come right on up. We specialize in helping lonely people."

I thought they specialized in favors. "Uh—how much do you charge?" If I'm wrong about this operation, she should hang up on me right there.

But she doesn't. "That depends on what—and who—you want."

I hang up, satisfied that I've finally gotten a handle on the situation. But I'll need a little more evidence to prove it.

I decide I'm rich enough for one more phone call. I talk to the clerk at the assessor's office and ask if she'd mind looking through court records while she's checking on that little problem. She sounds flatteringly glad to hear from me again. I might find myself swimming in those eyes yet.

When I finally get back to the office, I find that it's my turn to be ambushed. Debra, my secretary, informs me that the lady from the church and her attorney are in the Department Administrator's office, waiting for me. I go straight there, not even bothering to stop by my desk.

From the look of it, they've been there for quite a while and the boss does not look happy. She's a good sort, though, and I know she'll back me if she thinks I'm right.

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The woman I met at the church—Bishop Schwartz, as it turns out—won't shake my hand when we're introduced. She's dressed in a somber black suit with a high-collared white blouse and her hair is pulled severely away from her face. Quite a different picture from the woman who answered the door at the "church."

The attorney starts off by bringing a tape recorder out of his briefcase and setting it on the desk.. "I hope you don't mind, but I feel we should have this on record in case there are any further misunderstandings."

I know this is usually just an attempt at intimidation, but, man, I *hate* it when they do that.

The attorney punches the button and the machine starts whirring. "Bishop Schwartz called me this morning after your visit and was quite upset at the way you've handled her case." He allows himself an ominous pause before going on. "We're very concerned that you've violated the federal Constitution by interfering with the affairs of a religious organization." He tosses a look at my boss to see how he's faring.

"How did I do that?" I ask mildly.

"Well, for one thing, by trespassing on the property without consent."

I shake my head firmly. "I let them know I was coming—and I left when she told me to."

"That's not the point. The point is that you're acting on behalf of the State, and you shouldn't have been there without direct permission in advance."

My boss is ready for him there. "Technically, we *had* permission. Ultimate Church requested exemption from property taxes, and in order to grant that exemption the State has to verify their claims. Consent to do that was implied when they signed the application form. As long as the investigator verified that they were open, he was authorized to go there."

"Well." He sounds disappointed. A lot of attorneys underestimate us by thinking we're not up on the laws.

The Bishop interrupts. "Mr. Robbins' attitude was what I objected to. He made it quite clear this morning that he didn't approve of religious organizations. In fact, he told me he was an atheist and he thought all churches were frauds."

My chin must have clunked when it hit the floor, because everyone turns to look at me. "I never said that," I stammer lamely. What's her angle here? Why is she saying this?

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The Bishop gives me a stern look, like a schoolmarm who's caught a student in a lie. "I suppose you're not going to admit that you made improper advances to me, either."

Something about shock makes me a blathering idiot. All I can think to say is, *"Huh?"*

Good sort or not, my boss is in a snare. She has to hear them out. "Suppose you tell me exactly what occurred," she asks the Bishop.

Bishop Schwartz looks upset, then she sniffles into a handkerchief and wipes her eyes. "Well, I was getting out of the shower when Mr. Robbins arrived, so I didn't have anything on but my robe when I answered the door. He started looking at me strangely right away, so I tried to hide behind the door, but he pushed it open."

The attorney pats her hand, eyeing me like a snake. "Go on, Bishop. I know it's difficult, but you have to tell us what happened—the whole story."

She looks at me, and I hope my face is registering the total outrage I'm feeling.

If it is, it doesn't faze her. "He—he kept looking at me and saying that if I wanted the church to have exemption, I'd better play along with him."

Replaying the conversation in my mind, I realize that she's reporting what I *said* fairly accurately, but adding overtones that weren't there. Could they have been imagined, I wonder? Meanwhile, I have this plunging feeling in my stomach that I *look* guilty as sin.

She glares at me malevolently. "I told him I was going to call his boss, and he finally left. But then he phoned, and—he even offered to *pay* me." She hides her eyes in her handkerchief and makes sobbing noises. "Of course, I hung up right away."

My boss is looking at me. "Did you call after you left the property?"

My gut is halfway to China. "I called, but it wasn't like that. I had a theory that—" I see the lawyer lean forward and stop myself. Without more proof, I'd better not say anything.

"I insist that this individual be fired immediately!" The lawyer pounds the desk for emphasis.

"I think Mr. Robbins should have the right to respond more fully to your client's charges." She looks at me. "Carl?"

My mind is going about forty miles an hour, but I can't figure any way that it doesn't work out in the Bishop's favor. If asked, I'm going to have to admit that I pretty much said what she claims I did. "I'd

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like a little more time to think all this through before I say anything," I tell them.

The lawyer glares at me. "At the very least, I must insist that he be removed from the case. Obviously he cannot handle this in an unbiased manner."

"I'll take over the case," my boss agrees, with a firm look in my direction that says, Don't interfere. She needn't worry about that—I'll give her the case and the headaches that go with it gladly. That's why she gets paid the big bucks.

The attorney gives her a gratified smile. He shuts off the tape recorder, pulls the tape out, and gives it a pat. "I believe the church has grounds right here for a fairly large lawsuit against Mr. Robbins, and while we can't sue the State we probably have strong grounds for appeal of any negative decision on the part of this office." He puts the tape in his pocket, giving it one last pat.

Once again, I'm confused. There's no logic to that action. We're obviously not finished talking. After saying that he was worried about misunderstandings, why doesn't the guy want the tape to keep running?

No sooner wondered than revealed. The lawyer continues in a "let's be reasonable" tone of voice. "Listen, the Bishop was reluctant to come here to begin with. She's really not anxious to cause problems, but I insisted that we confront this—individual." He gestures toward me with contempt. "However, our major concern is not Mr. Robbins, but rather the unreasonable tax burden the church is bearing. I believe that if we can come to an agreement regarding the exemption, and provided that I'm satisfied that Mr. Robbins will receive some sort of discipline, we would be willing to let the matter drop."

Slick. I almost have to admire these two. In a slimy sort of way, they're really good.

My boss is onto them, too. "As I said, I'll take over the case and I'll investigate your charges against Mr. Robbins. However, I can't give you an answer on either issue right now. I'm going to need time to go over the facts."

The attorney gives her a rather scathing look. "I've brought with me a number of documents which I believe will be sufficient for you to determine the facts about the property here and now. Considering what my client has been through, I feel that she is within her rights to insist that this matter be settled immediately or she will proceed with charges."

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"Let me see what you've brought," my boss responds quietly, looking defeated.

The Bishop gives me a triumphant look that confirms that this was what they were after coming in. I envision my hands closing around her throat.

The attorney picks up his briefcase again and pulls out a sheaf of papers. "I brought a copy of the church's constitution and its financial statement for the latest fiscal year. The church has been exempt from Federal income taxes for some time."

I fight back a snort of contempt. That tells you just how careful the Feds are about their exemptions.

My boss reads over the papers. "Everything looks in order."

I'm having this silent quarrel with myself. I know it's in my best interests to let this go through, but there's something in me that won't roll over and I do have one ace I can play. "Uh, you should know that I had a little problem with title. The assessor's records showed the property was owned by Bishop Schwartz rather than the church."

The attorney smiles and reaches into his little bag of tricks. "We hadn't gotten this deed recorded yet. My fault—I just haven't been to the recorder's office lately."

Sure enough, the deed shows the property was conveyed over a month ago to the church.

The Bishop basks in my disappointment for a moment, then reaches into her satchel and pulls out a little trick of her own. "Also, I brought along a number of pictures of various church activities at the property."

I look over my boss's shoulder as she thumbs through the photos. There's a snapshot of the Bishop sprinkling water on a baby and another of a young couple standing at an altar. Toward the end there's a picture of the same couple running out of a *concrete* church building.

"That's not the subject property," I tell my boss.

"He's lying!" the Bishop shouts.

"I have pictures to prove it in the file." Grinning, I pick up my own briefcase.

The attorney rises, his face getting redder by the minute. "I thought you'd removed this gentleman from the case."

"I did," my boss agrees amiably. "But I also said that he'd have a chance to argue his case with regard to your client's accusation.

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The pictures he took of the property would seem to have a strong bearing on your client's credibility."

One by one, as though I were displaying a winning poker hand, I lay my pictures down on the boss's desk.

She compares them with the pictures the Bishop brought. "This doesn't appear to be the same property."

The attorney reaches out a hand. "May we see them?"

Together, the attorney and client go over the photos, occasionally whispering to each other. I can hear a little of what they're saying. "No way you can refute this without admitting—" "Tell them we've remodeled!" "Just cut our losses—"

Finally, the attorney returns the photos, clearing his throat. "At this time, my client would like to withdraw her church's application for exemption."

My boss stands, accepting the attorney's hand. Then she turns to the Bishop. "And the charges against Mr. Robbins?"

The Bishop avoids her eyes. "Never mind."

I'm tempted to say something, but I decide to quit while I'm ahead.

Later that afternoon, when I get back from break, I find a faxed copy of a court document on my desk, compliments of the pretty redhead at the county assessor's office. For this I owe her a dinner. It shows that in 1986, a Ms. Sherley Schwartz was convicted of running a house of ill-repute.

Like any good citizen would, I pick up the phone and tell the police that I believe Sherley's back in business—this time using a very interesting trade name.

Not bad for one day's work.

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DETECTIVERSE

DOUBLE INDEMNITY

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

The husband wanted money—
Therefore he thought it wise
To collect his wife's insurance
By expediting her demise.
His need for cash was urgent,
So he'd do the job real quick—
Some poison at their morning meal
Was sure to do the trick.
His sinister intentions
Were to his wife unknown,
Since she was busy planning
A pet project of her own.
She dumped strychnine in his oatmeal
(He'd put sugar in her bran,
Sugar laced with cyanide—
That was his murder plan).
She doctored up the orange juice
And the scrambled eggs he liked—
The jelly for his morning toast
Was liberally spiked.
His decaffeinated coffee
She made a lethal brew
With a drop or two of nicotine—
The cream was poisoned, too.
He ate a hearty breakfast,
Then expired at eight-o-five—
His wife, who'd barely touched her food,
Was destined to survive.
His scheme to terminate his spouse
From the first was doomed to fail,
For the female of the species
Is more deadly than the male.

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a *NEW* short story by

JUNE THOMSON

Esme's dream garden was so real that she felt the warmth actually on her skin, tingling through her fingertips and the roots of her hair, giving her that sensation of lightness so that it wouldn't have surprised her if she had floated up from her chair and hung suspended over the others.

The prize-winning author of fifteen novels, June Thomson's latest to be published in the U.S.—by Doubleday—is Rosemary for Remembrance. *It takes place at a private girls' school during a summer creative-writing seminar, its themes are jealousy, revenge, and burnout, and it has been called, like so many of her previous novels, a great treat. The author was born in Kent, was brought up in Essex, and, after bringing up two boys, has now settled in St. Albans . . .*

A WALK TO THE PARADISE GARDEN

by JUNE THOMSON

For several months, Esme had had this dream—always the same, although the details of it varied on each separate occasion.

She was standing outside a pair of large, ornate wrought-iron gates, chained and padlocked together but allowing her, through the metal tracery, a glimpse of a long, grassy garden path, enclosed on each side by high yew hedges.

There seemed to be no means of entering, and then, when she had finally given up hope, she suddenly found herself inside the gates and walking along the path between the clipped hedges, in which arched entrances, like doorways, had been cut.

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What happened afterward differed from dream to dream.

Sometimes she turned left through one of the archways and found herself in an enclosed Italian garden. This was the most vivid of her dreams and the one she was able to recall afterward in greatest detail, largely because of its formal beauty. Its main feature was a rectangular ornamental pond, in the center of which a fountain sent up jets of glittering water over the marble statue of a woman which reclined on a stone plinth, like a small white island in the middle of the pool, its shape outlined against the dense, small-leaved foliage of the surrounding yew hedges.

On other occasions, she found herself wandering in what she called the English garden, which had a wide sweep of lawn and a broad herbaceous border backed by a brick wall. Although she never actually saw it, she was aware of the presence of a house, to which the garden seemed to belong and which stood somewhere just out of sight behind the wall.

But whatever the details of each particular vision, whenever she dreamed of the garden she felt an overwhelming sense of happiness and relief, of being so light that at times she became physically buoyant and, floating high above the ground, she was able to look down on the whole layout as if it had been spread out like a map for her inspection.

Suspended in this manner, she could see that, in fact, the garden was a series of individual pleasure grounds, some small, some large, divided up like rooms by the yew hedges and into which she could gaze down, as if into the model of a house without its roof or into an intricate maze.

One, square-shaped, was furnished with a stone table and benches, while in another, larger and more oblong, reclining chairs covered in flowered fabric were set out in groups on the grass.

A third was so small that it resembled nothing more than a tiny cell of garden, paved with cobblestones and with what she took to be a sundial in the center.

For some reason, the sight of this garden always disturbed her, breaking the mood of exultation and joy which the rest of the dream evoked in her. Immediately after glimpsing it, she invariably woke up with a sense of loss and longing which she couldn't explain.

But the focus of all these separate elements of the dream was undoubtedly the Italian garden. When she floated above it and looked down on the statue in the pool, the water glittering like metal in the strong sunlight, she felt, despite the hot, silent atmosphere

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it seemed to exude, a feeling of excitement and danger as if any moment something wonderful and potent were about to happen within its walls of dark-green yew.

It had been Esme's intention to say nothing to the other women in the art class about the dreams. Halfway through the afternoon sessions, they always gathered in the canteen, where, over cups of tea or coffee, they usually chatted about themselves. Esme had always held aloof from these conversations, offering nothing except general remarks. She felt it was demeaning to allow comparative strangers into any part of her personal life.

And then one afternoon the conversation turned to the subject of dreams.

Alice, fat and talkative, who had already confided to the group what Esme considered were deeply embarrassing details about her married life, suddenly said, "I had ever such a funny dream last night," and went on to describe it in tedious detail.

As Esme listened, she had an overwhelming desire to tell them about her own dream of the garden, the glittering water, the reclining woman. It came back to her in such vivid detail that it was almost like reliving the experience, so that, for whole seconds at a time, she was able to forget the ugly, plastic-topped table at which they were sitting, littered with paper cups and spilt sugar, even to forget Alice's voice going on and on, and to re-enter the garden, seeing again with waking eyes the long grass path and the fountain and to feel once more that sense of joy and release that the place always evoked in her.

It was so real that she felt the warmth actually on her skin, tingling through her fingertips and the roots of her hair, giving her that sensation of lightness so that it wouldn't have surprised her if she had floated up from her chair and hung suspended above them.

It was out of this feeling of buoyancy that, as Alice finished speaking, she heard her own voice, almost as if it were someone else's, saying, "I've had a dream, too. In fact, I often dream it."

"Do you? How interesting!"

It was one of the staff who answered. Miss Copstock. Although she preferred to be called Daphne—in order, Esme supposed a little contemptuously, to be on friendly terms with everyone, even though this didn't stop her from adopting a patronizing air toward them.

She was looking superior now, bending her spectacles on Esme and smiling with that affected little primp to the corners of her

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mouth to show just how deeply interested she was. "A recurring dream! Do tell us about it."

Faced with the circle of their faces round the table, Esme faltered. She didn't really want to tell them after all, she realized. Their curiosity offended her. The dream had gone, anyway, receding into the distance so that the images it contained seemed very small and insignificant. She suddenly hated herself and them for having exposed it in this way.

"Go on, Esme," Daphne—Miss Copstock, rather—was urging, bending her glittering spectacles closer.

Very reluctantly, for Esme realized she would have to say something, she replied, her voice stiff and foolish, "It's about a garden—a very beautiful garden."

"And what's in the garden? Flowers?"

Miss Copstock sounded as if she were talking to a child, using an upward lift at the end of the sentence, encouraging Esme to continue.

It was Alice who spoke first, tittering with laughter so that her cheeks wobbled and chanting some stupid verse she must have learned at school.

"Buttercups and daisies,
Oh, such pretty flowers!
Growing in the springtime
To tell of sunny hours."

Esme turned on her. It was not often that she lost her temper, but she resented being made to look a fool, hated Alice's awful, common banality, Miss Copstock's false sympathy. "Yes, there are flowers," she retorted, feeling the warmth of anger this time running up into her face. "And a statue and a pool of water. I'm always happy there, but I don't expect any of you to understand."

"Now, now," Miss Copstock was saying, sounding more than ever like a children's nanny and glancing at her watch as she spoke so that Esme half expected her to announce it was bedtime. "We don't want any unpleasantness, do we? Break's nearly over, anyway. I think it's time we went back to the art room."

In the art room, Esme retired to her corner away from the others. Despite her protests, she had been put down for pottery that month. She hated the slimy feel of the clay on her hands and the way it dried out her skin over the knuckles. But for once, it had its compensations. Banging and kneading the lump of clay, she felt some of her anger appeased.

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The noise also covered up the sound of Miss Copstock's footsteps which approached from behind her.

"You mustn't take too much notice of Alice," she said.

"I don't," Esme retorted, slamming the clay down onto the board.

Miss Copstock, after watching for a few moments in silence, seemed about to tell Esme that she was not wedging the clay properly and then, changing her mind, said instead, "Why don't you paint a picture of the garden? If you want any materials, you only have to ask."

She then walked away.

Interfering old bitch! Esme thought resentfully.

She had no intention of taking up Miss Copstock's suggestion. It had been stupid of her to mention the dream in the first place. To attempt to reproduce it on paper would only make it worse.

As it was, even speaking of it seemed a greater mistake than Esme had realized because for the next few nights the dream did not return. It was as if her words had banished it to some dark recess in her mind from which it refused to re-emerge.

Esme tried to coax it out. Every night before going to sleep, she made a deliberate effort to conjure up its images. Lying awake in the dark, her eyes closed, she thought of the statue, the pool of bright water, the high yew hedges, until in her imagination she could see them quite clearly, even smell the aromatic scent of the small, close-packed leaves.

But, however vivid the images were in her waking mind, her sleeping subconsciousness refused to reproduce them and she awoke each morning with an overwhelming sense of loss, feeling bereft of something very beautiful and precious, as if happiness itself had been snatched away from her.

And then one night in the second week of her bereavement, the dream returned. There was the padlocked gate, its wrought-iron patterns etched very black against the green path which extended behind it, each individual grass stem glistening as if painted over with dissolved light.

For what seemed like hours, Esme remained outside the gate, gazing through it. But just when she thought she would never pass beyond it, the miracle happened and she found herself standing in the Italian garden.

It was the same as it always had been, with one subtle difference. The mood had changed. The sunlight was still there, lying so bril-

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liantly on the water and on the white statue of the reclining woman that it dazzled her eyes, as if it were reflected back from a glittering blade. But despite the brightness, the atmosphere was somber and brooding.

The same mood hung over the rest of the garden, which, with the illogical perspective of dreams, she was able to observe as well, for although she remained in the Italian garden she could nevertheless see into the other gardens in a series of rapid little glimpses, like pictures thrown up onto a screen—the small cobbled garden with the sundial in the center, the square garden with the table and benches, the long garden with the reclining chairs, and, finally, the English garden, where she again felt the presence of the house, which seemed to have something floating above it. A cloud, perhaps? She wasn't sure, for as she tried to focus on it the image vanished and she found herself standing once more in the Italian garden, which had suddenly grown dark although she could hear the fountain splashing, its fine jets of water pattering down on the surface of the pool in drops of pure, liquid sound.

She awoke at that moment, feeling in a strange mood of mixed happiness and grief, her joy that the dream had returned overshadowed by the somber atmosphere that had hung over the garden. It was like returning to a place one had loved as a child and finding it neglected and abandoned.

The mood haunted her all day and she spoke to no one, concentrating instead on the images in the dream which kept flashing back into her mind.

In the afternoon, it was art class. As usual, Esme barricaded herself in her corner, well away from the others, and stared at the coil-pot she was supposed to be making. It was an ugly, squat object which she hated. Suddenly, without coming to any conscious decision, she crushed it with her fist back into the formless lump of clay out of which it had been made and, getting to her feet, went to the cupboard where the art materials were kept.

No one appeared to notice her. Miss Copstock was busy with a group doing fabric-printing, her back turned as she bent over the silk-screen.

Helping herself to brushes, paints, and the largest sheet of paper she could find, Esme set up an easel in her corner, dragging it round so that its back was toward the room before clipping the paper into place.

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It was like a cinema screen, she thought—very white and blank, onto which she could project any image she liked.

She wanted to put it all down—the grass path, the yew hedges, the statue—but as she began to paint, a strange thing happened. The images which she held in her mind began to telescope, so that the padlocked gate appeared, almost without her volition, in the middle of one of the yew hedges that surrounded the Italian garden. It was important to include it, of course. The gate was the entrance to the dream.

In the same way, the perspective tilted so that, above the hedges, there were glimpses of the other gardens, a little foreshortened in order to include them all but stretching back almost to the top edge of the paper, where she painted in a broad band of blue to indicate the summer sky.

The layout of the Italian garden was not quite the same, either, as it had been in her dream. It was smaller than she remembered it, while the statue of the reclining woman had assumed such large proportions that it almost filled the ornamental pool.

Not that it really mattered, Esme decided. The statue now gave a focus of attention to the foreground of the picture.

After an hour, Esme sat back and looked critically at the finished painting. She was surprised to find that she was pleased with it. It had caught the mood of the garden, she thought—its air of still sunlight and anticipation as if it were waiting for something exciting and wonderful to happen.

But a detail was missing—quite what, she wasn't sure.

Was it the house?

Perhaps that was it. Although she had never seen it, she had felt its presence and she wanted to indicate in some way that it was there, behind the high hedges—the guardian spirit, if you like, of the whole dream.

As she thought about it, she remembered seeing in the dream the night before something floating above the house, and, sitting there, she suddenly realized what it had been. Not a cloud, after all, but a flag fluttering above the unseen roof.

Picking up her brushes, Esme painted it in—a white flag with a red cross on it. That done, she sat back again to study the painting. It looked more complete now with the flag outlined against the band of blue sky in the right-hand corner.

But she still wasn't satisfied. Something else was missing —something from the Italian garden itself: a brilliant, flashing object which

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had glittered in the sun. But before she could concentrate on it and bring it into sharper focus, Miss Copstock approached.

"Break-time, Esme," she announced brightly, and then, edging round the easel, she looked at the picture and remarked, "So you took my advice, after all, and painted the dream. It's very good!"

Esme put down her brush, resenting Miss Copstock's presence.

Whatever the missing object was, it was too late now to include it even if she managed to recall it. The picture would have to remain as it was.

Miss Copstock was saying, "Has it got a title? It ought to have one, you know."

Esme hadn't considered giving the picture a title. It was enough to have painted it and she was about to say, "No, it hasn't, it doesn't need one," when she remembered the name of something—a piece of music, wasn't it?—which suddenly came into her mind very much as the image of the flag had occurred to her.

" 'A Walk to the Paradise Garden,' " she said and, getting up from her chair, pushed past Miss Copstock and went toward the door.

At the end of the art class, she wanted to take the painting with her but Miss Copstock dissuaded her.

"Oh, do leave it here, Esme," she said. "It's so good, I want to mount it properly for you. You can collect it next week."

Before Esme could protest, Miss Copstock had begun to shoo everyone away so that she could lock up.

Dr. Mortimer had Esme's painting photographed and a transparency developed, which, projected onto the large screen in the lecture hall, gave the students sitting in the tiers of seats the impression that part of the back wall had been replaced by a large window looking out over a vista of grass and water and high hedges. Against this background, a statue of a reclining woman, placed in the center of an ornamental pool, appeared twice the size of Dr. Mortimer and loomed just behind his left shoulder.

"A painting of a dream," Dr. Mortimer announced in his dramatic manner. "Any comments?"

The students looked and whispered, unsure what to say. The picture was certainly strange, with its peculiar perspective and brooding, sunlit atmosphere.

"Come now," Dr. Mortimer cajoled them. "Surely someone has an opinion. No? Then may I remind you of the work we did last week

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on symbols?" And, lifting his white pointer, he directed it at the padlocked gate.

"Alienation?" someone suggested. "Whoever painted the picture feels locked out?"

Dr. Mortimer peered along the cone of light from the projector toward the speaker.

"Or perhaps locked in?" he suggested. "What about the pool?"

"Water—the subconscious mind?"

Another voice offered the idea more boldly.

"Good! Good!" Dr. Mortimer exclaimed, rising on his toes in encouragement. "We're beginning to get somewhere at last! And the series of enclosed gardens which can be glimpsed above the hedges? What about those?"

"Areas of the subconscious mind that can only be revealed in dreams?" suggested a third voice.

After these first few comments, the students began to grow more confident, offering one idea after another. The hedges represented barriers thrown up by the conscious mind; the fountain a sudden inspirational burst, symbolizing the imaginative energy generated by the dream itself; the statue the ego controlling that energy, or perhaps the dreamer himself.

"Herself," corrected Dr. Mortimer. "And what about the flag?" he added, directing the tip of the pointer toward the white oblong with its red cross fluttering above the garden.

But no one had any ideas about that, except for one wag who suggested that, as it was the flag of St. George, perhaps the dreamer had been born on April twenty-third, an answer which brought laughter to the packed lecture room.

Beaming, Dr. Mortimer made one or two short turns up and down the rostrum in front of the screen, hands clasped behind his back, the pointer jigging up and down.

When he finally came to a halt and faced the students again, he wagged the stick at them in mock admonition.

"All very interesting, ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "And some of it may be true. But you've made the mistake of assuming that the symbols produced by the subconscious mind are complex and tortuous. I have used this particular painting to demonstrate to you that they can, on the contrary, be quite simple and straightforward. So, let us re-examine the picture in this more prosaic light.

"The artist is a middle-aged woman I shall call E, the only child of an elderly, well-to-do widow. As a young girl, E suffered from a

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personality disorder, an inability to relate to other people and a tendency to outbursts of irrational behavior which became worse as she grew older. Up to the age of sixteen, she was educated in a special school. When she left there, the mother, rather than have her admitted to a psychiatric hospital, preferred to keep her at home, although she made sure that the daughter was very strictly supervised—so much so that E felt herself imprisoned. Hence the padlocked gate and the small gardens enclosed with high hedges, which represent, I believe, the rooms in the house or perhaps, even more straightforwardly, the walled garden that surrounded it.

"As the years went by, E began to think of herself more and more as a prisoner and longed to break free. Which one day she did, quite dramatically, by stabbing her mother as she was taking a bath. The bathroom, by the way, happened to have wallpaper patterned with green leaves. It's all there. Only the knife which struck the fatal blows is missing."

The pointer moved delicately over the screen, touching first the high yew hedges, then the pool with its spurting jets, and finally the figure itself lying in the water.

"She was discovered," Dr. Mortimer continued, "wandering about the garden, covered in blood, by a neighbor. Thinking she had injured herself, the man sent for an ambulance." And here the pointer indicated the flag with its red cross.

"E was found guilty but insane and is at present a patient in a secure prison hospital, suffering from schizophrenia. This further and even closer confinement may well be indicated by the small, cobbled garden you can see in the top right-hand corner of the picture. I'm sure none of you need my help to interpret the symbol of the sundial at its center.

"E never refers to the murder and seems to have forgotten it. Perhaps she has on a conscious level. It is doubtful she will ever be released."

He paused and seemed about to walk away, as if the demonstration were over, but, with one of the dramatic little flourishes with which he loved to embellish his lectures, he suddenly turned back to add a last comment.

"By the way, ladies and gentlemen, I forgot to mention that E gave the painting a title. She called it 'A Walk to the Paradise Garden.' You can make of that what you wish."

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Some kidnapers are just lonely people, usually women, who want a child to love and cherish, and don't seem to realize what a terrible thing they're doing to the kid's parents. That kind don't ordinarily make any threats . . .

A SCARY PRINTOUT

by ARTHUR PORGES

I've never been in the least superstitious, but I need to write this down. After all, I am a sort of scientist, if marginally, and recording data that may later prove relevant is basic to that discipline.

"Write"—that's a silly choice of word to use in my case. When did I last write anything "by hand," as they say? It'll be a printout, of course.

Yes, I'm a computer expert, and so the last man on earth you'd expect to get death threats. I'm not one of those illegal kid hackers, out to spread worms and viruses just to make trouble or swell my ego. I'm almost forty-one, and just the opposite, in fact, since I work for law-enforcement agencies.

You've probably seen the kind of thing I do on TV—it's pretty well covered and fascinates people. What I do is take a photo of some kidnaped child who's been missing for years, and with my computer show what he looks like now. That way, there's a much better chance of spotting him, even after all this time, and bringing him home. Or her. It's just a matter of measuring certain parts of the face, using known data from biology—the way a human being changes over time—on the relations between the nose, say, and the other features best for recognition, and then feeding the right variables into the computer. After that, the graphics take over, and there on the screen you'll see the missing kid as he looks now, maybe ten years old or whatever. It's a great method, and I've helped find dozens of such victims.

Sometimes the kidnapers are not really criminals, but just lonely people, usually women, who want a child to love and cherish, and don't seem to realize what a terrible thing they're doing to the kid's parents.

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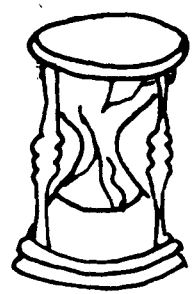
That kind don't ordinarily make any threats against me. But some kidnapers are really psycho, horrible creeps who steal and keep children for their perverse pleasures. It's one of that sort who sent me the latest death threat—one I take very seriously. The damned bungling Keystone Kops of Corona del Norte had him cold when they found the poor kid—she'd been kept in a broom-closet for most of three years—but somehow he got past them. And when he saw my projected photo in the papers and on TV, and knew I was the one who had broken the case, causing some neighbors to recognize the girl on one of those rare occasions when he took her outside for a few minutes, he meant to have revenge.

Ordinarily, I've not taken such threats too seriously. I may lie rather low for a while and look over my shoulder, but that's it. And so far nobody's taken a shot at me or fire-bombed my house. But this time—well, I just don't know. You see, when things are a bit slack, I like to run my own face through the computer. A few months ago, I projected my looks to age sixty-five, and was pleased to see not too much of a change. My parents gave me the right genes—in their late seventies, they looked great.

But yesterday I made some other runs, beginning with fifty and going both ways from there, up to eighty—as if I'd make that!—and then back to forty-five.

It keeps coming out the same, even when I alter the variables here and there. I was ready for wrinkles and sagging, but what I'm getting on the screen is just a grinning skull.



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another distinguished ghost story by

ROBERTSON DAVIES

The Ghost Chill is upon us once again, thanks to Robertson Davies. "The Great Queen Is Amused" is one of the ghost stories he told at the annual Christmas party during his eighteen-year tenure as Master of the University of Toronto's Massey College . . .

THE GREAT QUEEN IS AMUSED

by ROBERTSON DAVIES

The first Christmas we celebrated in College I told a ghost story on this occasion because I had had an odd experience just before the Gaudy and thought it might amuse you. The second Christmas I told another, only because it was true and a footnote to the first. It was never my intention that these stories should multiply. The last thing I desire for Massey College is the shabby notoriety of being haunted. I am not a man who particularly likes, or seeks, ghosts: I never saw a ghost till I came here—came to a brand-new building, every brick of which I had seen set in place, and all the furnishings of which have been known to me since they came from the makers. I had always thought that ghosts were superstitions. I wish I thought so still.

It happened a week ago last Sunday. I perceive that you have gone at once to the heart of the matter; it is a pleasure to address a truly perceptive audience. You have recognized immediately that the date was December the fifth—the Vigil of Saint Nicholas, patron of scholars, and therefore an unseen but real presence in this College. It was near to midnight, and I lay in my bed, reading myself to sleep,

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when I felt stealing over me that special uneasiness which I have learned—but only since I came here—to associate with a particular kind of trouble.

In university life one quickly becomes expert in identifying several sorts of disquiet; I have one which I believe is all my own, and I call it the Ghost Chill. My temperature drops suddenly, my breathing is labored, my vision is disturbed so that stable objects seem to advance and retreat before my eyes, and I feel a stirring in my scalp as though my hair were rising. I see some medical men in the audience smirking; simple fright, they think. Oh, no, nothing so easy as that; I am not frightened, but disagreeably *aware*. I know that something quite out of the ordinary—something untoward —something both inescapable and exhausting—is about to happen to me. I know that I have slipped out of the groove of one sort of life and am trapped for a time in an alien realm.

The Ghost Chill also makes one sensitive to sounds which other people do not hear. As I lay in my bed, I became conscious of sobbing and sighing and wailing—as of a great number of people shaken with grief and despair and (this was the worst of it) expecting something of me. How did I know this? I cannot tell you. But I knew it quite clearly. I was not frightened but I was deeply disturbed and depressed. I knew that things would be worse before they were better, and I knew also that I could not escape whatever lay before me. So I rolled up my book, put it back in its locked case, put on my dressing-gown and slippers, and set out for the scene of the disturbance.

How did I know where to look? That is another of the characteristics of the Ghost Chill. One knows where to go. I do not make any pretentious claim that one is guided to a particular spot; one just knows where to go. So I trudged downstairs and through the passage on the lowest floor that leads to the Lower Library.

The lights are always burning there, with a hard, charmless blaze that should be enough to discourage the most insensitive ghost. I could see at once that there was nobody in the Reference Room, but from the room which is marked "Press Room and Stacks" the sound that was drawing me was audible—to my sensitive ear, you understand—in dreadful volume. As I unlocked the door, I felt fear for the first time.

How does fear manifest itself in you? With me it is like being stabbed with a cruelly cold knife; for an instant it is a paralysis,

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then a pain, then a shock. Why was I afraid now? Because I had remembered something that was in the stacks.

Our library has, from time to time, been given generous gifts of books. Even before the College opened, one gift came to us of a hundred or more volumes, of which all but five were works of Canadian literature. We are already modestly famous for our collection of Canadian literature, you know. But those five were books to which the Librarian paid scant attention, because they did not fit into any of the categories of our collection. They were the works of a man of whom some of you will have heard, and whose name may raise a smile. It was Aleister Crowley; he died not long ago, putting an end to a life that had been spent in trying to impose himself on the world as a magician. Most people laughed at him, but there is no doubt that his career was an unsavory one, and he was involved in scandals that were disastrous, and sometimes fatal, to people who had come under his influence. There were five of Aleister Crowley's books in the stacks, piled together on a shelf of unclassified volumes, and once or twice I had suggested to the Librarian that we should get rid of them, or put them in the vault. But I had forgotten them, and so had he. I remembered them now with the terrible onset of fear that I have already described.

But as I have told you, when the Ghost Chill is upon me, I have to do what lies before me, afraid or not. So I turned the key in the lock, pushed back the heavy door, and walked inside.

There I saw a scene of such complex disorder that I do not know where to begin to describe it. The light was extraordinary, to begin with; it was not the electric glare of the Reference Room, but a wavering blue light, as though I stood in the middle of a gas flame. There was one other living creature in the stacks, and I recognized her with dismay. I cannot reveal her name, for she is well known to many of you and I do not wish to involve her in unseemly gossip. I must say, however, that she knows our library well, for she has spent many hours in the stacks, doing some research in Canadian literature for her husband. She stood, tall, straight, and unafraid, looking about her in wonder, and as the door slammed into place she turned to look at me.

"You had better step inside this circle if you don't want to get into trouble," she said in the soft yet deliberate and pleasing accents which tell of a childhood spent in the Hebrides. I saw that she stood in a chalk circle that had been carefully drawn on the floor and I hastened to her side. She was calm in the midst of the frantic dis-

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turbance that surrounded us. I suppose presidents' wives are always calm before scenes of despair and tumult; they learn that art at faculty receptions.

"What on earth are you doing?" I demanded.

"I'm afraid I've been careless with the books," she replied, and in her hand I recognized one of Crowley's volumes, opened at a drawing that looked like a mathematical diagram. "I just wanted to see if this recipe worked as well as the author said it did, and it seems to have caused a little trouble."

A little trouble! I detest understatement; it always seems to me to be dangerous frivolity. A little trouble! My eyes were now accustomed to the strange light, and I could see that the whole area of the stacks was filled with agitated, insubstantial figures; each one was clear to the eye, but it was also transparent. The floor stood thick with them, leaping, writhing, shoving, and jostling as they attempted to stand on their hands and fell to the floor every time with shrieks of despair. Some others danced about on their hands, laughing in derisive triumph, and still others crowded all the space immediately below the ceiling. These were even stranger than the dervishes on the floor, for they were curled into balls, their heads tucked into their hands clasped loosely before them as they bobbed, somersaulted, and turned gently in the air, like hideous balloons. And, most extraordinary circumstance of all, every one of these figures was stark naked.

What does one say under such circumstances? Almost any remark one can think of is unequal to the occasion. Undoubtedly mine was so. "What in the world have you done?" I said.

"Well, I've been reading a lot of these Canadian books, getting together material for Claude's anthology," she replied. "I got a bit curious about some of the authors—thought what fun it would be to talk to them, and all that—foolishness, I suppose. Then today I came across this book by this man Crowley, and he says it isn't hard to bring back the dead if you go about it in a respectful and proper manner. For the past two weeks I've been wishing I could have a word or two with Sara Jeanette Duncan; there's a bit in *The Imperialist* that always sounds to me as if something had been cut out of it and the gap never properly patched, and I thought—"

"You thought you'd get hold of Miss Duncan and ask her," I interrupted. The leisureliness of the beautiful anthologist's explanation nettled me.

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"Well, Crowley didn't seem to think there was much to it," she said.

"I think that before monkeying with Crowley you might have had the courtesy to speak to me," said I.

"Oh, don't be so pompous," said she.

Women always think that if they tell a man not to be pompous they will shut him up, but I am an old hand at that game. I know that if a man bides his time his moment will come. "Well," I said, "if you and Crowley are such a great pair, suppose you explain what has happened."

"That's just the difficulty," she said, with terrible Scottish patience, "I don't understand what has happened. I did all the right things, and called the name of Sara Jeanette Duncan, and these articles began to appear. Look at them, would you! Did you ever see such a sight in your life? What do you suppose they are?"

This was my moment of triumph. You see, I knew what they were.

It has been a lifelong habit of mine to read myself to sleep. Some people read light books—mystery stories and the like—in bed, but my custom has always been to read works of greater substance before sleeping. And not just to read them once, carelessly, but to read and reread a group of selected classics over and over again, year in and year out, for in this way they become a part of oneself. For many years a bedtime favorite of mine has been that very famous commentary on the Pentateuch, the *Midrash of Rabbi Tanhuma bar Abba*, most learned of the Fourth Century Talmudic mystics and sages. My copy of the *Midrash* is rather a nice one—a fine Tenth Century scroll, beautifully illuminated, though not particularly suited to reading in bed because it is fourteen feet long, and as it must be read from right to left this means a lot of winding and rewinding. It is encased at both ends in copper and gold; the rubies on the casing scratch my hands now and then, but I don't greatly mind. It is a small price to pay for keeping my Hebrew alive. As luck would have it, I had been reading the scroll of Rabbi Tanhuma when the Ghost Chill came upon me.

Of course you have guessed what the explanation was. Not all of you will have read the great *Midrash,* but certainly you have read Louis Ginzberg's seven-volume compilation of Jewish legends and will have formed your own conclusions. But Hebrew studies are neglected in the Hebrides and so, for the sake of completeness, I must continue exactly as if you were as much in the dark as was my companion.

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She had asked me what I supposed these apparitions were. "Why," I said, "this is Hell, and these are spirits of the dead."

"Don't be silly," she replied, "it isn't a bit like Hell, except perhaps for the noise."

"What do you suppose Hell to be?" said I. "The word merely means a dark and enclosed place, inhabited by spirits. A perfect description of the stacks in Massey College Library. Rabbi Tanhuma says it is indistinguishable from Paradise; both damned and saved pass a few millennia there. I suppose you called up a single spirit and have received a wholesale delivery; Crowley is a most untrustworthy guide."

"But who are they?" said she.

"It is only too clear that they are the ghosts of the Canadian authors whose books are here," said I.

"Then why are they so noisy?" she asked. Every time I think of it, I realize what a wealth of national feeling was compressed into that one inquiry.

"They are clamoring to be reborn," I explained, for my long acquaintance with Rabbi Tanhuma was at last showing its practical applicability. "Look, you see those who are floating in that strange, curled-up posture; they have placed themselves in the foetal position so that, when a child is conceived, they are ready at once to take possession of it in the womb, and come to earth again."

"Whatever for?" said she.

"Perhaps they hope that this time they might be born American authors," said I.

Our conversation had not been unnoticed by the spirits, who now began to float uncomfortably near us. Ernest Thompson Seton, though foetal in posture, was still clearly recognizable by the obstreperous outdoorsiness of his appearance; one spirit, naked like the rest, was walking on her hands, and it was only by the invincible dignity of her person, back and front, that I recognized Mrs. Susanna Moodie. Robert Barr looked particularly smug, and I knew why; a Junior Fellow of Massey College is making a fullscale study of him, and he was flattered. A floating foetus bumped me—though spectrally—and I turned just in time to see that it was Nellie McClung, avid for rebirth. It was an eerie experience, I can tell you. I had just time to reflect that Canadian authors appeared, on the whole, to have been neglectful of their physiques.

"You don't suppose they mean us any harm, do you?" said my

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companion, with the first show of nervousness that I had observed in her.

I do not think that I am a cruel man, but I confess that there is a streak of austerity in my character, and it showed itself now. "They certainly do not mean *me* any harm," I replied. "I have not disturbed their rest. I have not frivolously routed them out of Paradise. What their intentions may be toward *you* I have no way of telling."

"What are you gong to do to get us out of here?" she asked, as if I had not spoken. It is thus that women rule the world.

"There is a practical difficulty," I said. "These ghosts can be put to rest only by the command of a king—a Hebrew king. They are uncommon nowadays, even in Massey College. We have one or two men of aristocratic birth, but they are unfortunately Aryan. We have a man whom I strongly suspect of being a chieftain in his homeland, but I am quite sure that an African chief would not fill the bill. Even a royal ghost might help us, but you know Canadian literature—no use looking there."

"I'm not so sure," said she. From the triumph in her voice I knew that she had an idea. The circle in which we stood was not too far from the stacks for her to reach over into what the Librarian calls the Matthews Collection, and this is what she did now, handing me two weighty volumes bound in half-calf. I looked at the title. It was *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in The Highlands*; the date, 1868.

"But this is by Queen Victoria," said I.

"Of course," said she, "and a queen worth a dozen ordinary kings, and I'm pretty certain that she even qualifies as a Hebrew ruler. Disraeli used to tell her that she was descended from King David, and I doubt if a rabble of middle-class Canadian ghosts can say she wasn't. What's more, she also qualifies as a Canadian author. Wasn't she Queen of Canada?"

Women are very, very remarkable people.

"Come on," she said, "get to work. See what you can do."

I was glad of my long acquaintance with the works of the great Rabbi Tanhuma; it meant that I knew how to raise a spirit without resorting to the slipshod conjurations of Aleister Crowley. I did what was necessary with, I think I may say, a certain style, and gently and slowly there appeared between me and the beautiful anthologist that small, immensely dignified figure, familiar from a hundred portraits and statues. She wore the well known tiny crown, from the back of which depended a beautiful veil; across her bosom was a

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sash of a splendid blue, and on her left shoulder was pinned the Order of the Garter.

I am a democrat. All of my family have been persons of peasant origin, who have wrung a meager sufficiency from a harsh world by the labor of their hands. I acknowledge no one my superior merely on grounds of a more fortunate destiny, a favored birth. I did what any such man would do when confronted with Queen Victoria; I fell immediately to my knees.

"Rise at once," said the silvery voice with the beautiful, actresslike clarity of articulation, which has been so often described that it sounded almost familiar in my ears. "We have work to do that cannot wait. We presume that you wish to set at rest this disorderly group of my colonial subjects."

"If you would be so good, Your Majesty," said I. "These are Canadian writers, and here in Massey College our library is, it appears, a Paradise for the repose of all such as are represented on our shelves. The blessed in Paradise invariably appear to mortals either walking on their hands or in a posture convenient for rebirth—"

"Master," said Queen Victoria, "do not presume to teach the great-great-grandmother of your Sovereign how to suck eggs—or to lay ghosts, either. We shall have these spirits right-side-up and safely at rest in the squeezing of a lemon—to use an expression dear to our faithful ghillie, John Brown. But look what has happened. We wish an explanation."

I had been so occupied with Queen Victoria (who, even though I could see right through her, was, I assure you, much the most imposing and awesome person I have ever seen through in this world or any other) that I had not noticed what was going on among the ghosts. I saw that there had been a great reversal; those who had formerly been standing on their hands were now on their feet; those who had formerly been foetal in posture were now normally postnatal: but the others—those who had been trying to stand on their hands before—were now standing on their heads, and bitter tears were pouring from their eyes.

"Who can they be?" I murmured to myself.

"Those, Master," said Queen Victoria, "are impostors in Paradise—persons loosely attached to literature who are not themselves authors but who fatten upon authors. What place have they in Paradise? Surely you recognize them? Those, when they lived, were literary critics!"

I looked more closely, and indeed it was so. I saw—never mind

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who, and with him was—but the less said, the better. They were critics, all right.

"Away with them," cried the Queen, and the effect of her words was horrible. There was a roaring, as of a mighty rushing wind, and a tumult filled the room. I was thrown to the ground, but even as I fell I saw a figure, black and glistening, as of a naked man of extraordinary but frightening beauty, carrying a cruel scourge, who swooped upon the unfortunate critics. I thought I heard Queen Victoria say, "Good evening, Rhadamanthus," in a tone of genial politeness, as one monarch to another, but I cannot be sure, for the howls of the critics mounted to a scream.

"No!" they shrieked, "it's unfair! We really *were* authors! We, too, were creative! Living critics say so!" But it was unavailing. In an instant the critics were gone, and stillness filled the room. But, in our shelves, there were smoking, blackened gaps where their books had stood.

Then the great Queen made a splendid gesture of dismissal, and all the Canadian authors made their farewell. It took a long time, for they did so one by one, basking in the royal presence. The ladies curtsied—some, like Sarah Jeanette Duncan and Frances Brooke, with quite a fashionable air, and others as though they were improvising. Nakedness is unfriendly to a clumsy curtsy. The men bowed—all sorts of bows, from Kerby's splendid gesture with hand on heart and his right foot advanced to Ralph Connor's strange giving at the knees. But at last all of them had gone back into the shelves, and there we stood—Queen Victoria, the beautiful anthologist, and myself, in a room cleansed and calmed.

"You may leave us," said the Queen.

I bowed. "I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude—" I began, but as I spoke a smile of extraordinary sweetness broke over the royal features, which had already begun to fade, and before she vanished altogether there came to my ears, unmistakably—"The Queen was very much amused."

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THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

The historical novel continues to be crossed with the detective novel with remarkable results. Here, for example, are two new books with backgrounds of Elizabethan England. The first fills over 600 pages with a large cast of characters (some fictional, some historical) and multiple subplots and seems a sure contender for an Edgar award. The second is a shorter, less ambitious, but thoroughly enjoyable pure whodunit. (If you read both in close proximity, read the second one first.)

**** Faye Kellerman: *The Quality of Mercy,* Morrow, $19.95. The family of Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese *converso* (i.e., a Jew who has at least ostensibly converted to Christianity) and physician to Queen Elizabeth, continue to follow the old religion in secret while working to help Jews escape the Spanish Inquisition. Daughter Rebecca, a very strong and engaging heroine, becomes romantically involved with a Christian writer-player named William Shakespeare, who is trying to solve the murder of his theatrical mentor. An extraordinary novel, equally laudable for the fascination of its history, the non-stop readability of its story, the explicit (and appropriate) bawdiness of its dialogue and action, and the flesh-and-blood realization of its characters.

*** Edward Marston: *The Queen's Head,* St. Martin's, $16.95. In 1588, with the defeat of the Spanish Armada fresh in the public mind, London theater companies race to get a dramatization of the heroic battle on stage. Nicholas Bracewell, who serves Lord Westfield's Men as book holder—a job that seemingly combines the responsibilities of director and stage manager—adds detection of murder to his duties in a novel rich in detail of the Elizabethan theater.

**** David Madsen: *U.S.S.A.,* Morrow, $18.95. What-if novels usually involve a victory of the bad guys over the good (e.g., Len Deighton's *SS-GB,* about a Nazi-occupied Britain), but Madsen's second novel rings a change, giving us a post-World War III Soviet Union occupied by the United States. Dean Joplin, former C.I.A. man now Moscow private eye, is asked by his former student, Occupation Forces homicide detective Richard Gardner, to solve a hotel murder of sinister implications. This is a first-rate thriller with plot, action, characters, and social extrapolation expertly combined.

*** Henry Slesar: *Death on Television: The Best of Henry Slesar's Alfred Hitchcock Stories,* edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and Martin H. Greenberg, Southern Illinois University Press, P.O. Box 3697, Carbondale, IL 62902-3697, $19.95. In his Introduction, the author rechristens the small-screen Hitchcock "Master of Irony" rather than

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"Master of Suspense," and among specialists in the ironic, twist-in-the-tail crime/suspense short story Slesar holds a high rank. His first hardcover collection brings together nineteen stories that were adapted (by Slesar or others) for Hitchcock TV shows in the Fifties and Sixties. Thirteen of them were previously collected in a couple of scarce paperback-original collections, *Clean Crimes and Neat Murders* (1960) and *A Crime for Mothers and Others* (1962). In some of the stories, there has been an ill-advised and perfunctory effort to update, creating (e.g., in "Most Likely To Succeed" and "Starring the Defense") distracting contradictions about the age of the characters and confusion as to the time the action is taking place.

*** Hillary Waugh: *A Death in a Town,* Carroll and Graf, $15.95. The recent and deserving recipient of the Mystery Writers of America Grand Master Award delivers his best novel in years, a multi-narrator account of the search for a rapist-murderer in a close-knit Connecticut community—one so innocently trusting they don't even lock their doors in the 1980s. Though more a penetrating character study than a police procedural, the novel has some of the documentary flavor of Waugh classics like *Last Seen Wearing* and *The Missing Man.*

*** Gary Alexander: *Unfunny Money,* Walker, $17.95. Superintendent Bamsan Kiet is chief law-enforcement officer of Luong, an imaginary Southeast Asian country bordering Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand. In his second book-length adventure, a very funny study in clashing cultures, someone is producing large quantities of counterfeit *zin,* the Luongan currency, beautifully made but usually not worth faking, exchanging as it does at four hundred or more to one U.S. dollar. Kiet also takes extreme and ingenious measures in dealing with a religious cult that is bugging air travelers.

*** Charlotte and Aaron Elkins: *A Wicked Slice,* St. Martin's, $14.95. Golf mysteries have been proliferating lately, and you're unlikely to find a better one than this. Beautiful but impoverished young pro Lee Ofsted tries to make a buck in the Pacific-Western Women's Pro-Am while helping a Carmel cop find out who killed tour star Kate O'Brian. The two Elkinses provide just what Aaron Elkins has always delivered solo: a neat formal puzzle, a likeable central character, a well drawn cast of suspects, and a knowledgably detailed specialized background.

*** Simon Brett: *A Series of Murders,* Scribners, $16.95. Alcoholic actor Charles Paris gets temporary steady work (and more opportunity for amateur detecting) playing the dumb village cop in a TV series based on the Stanislas Braid novels of W. T. Wintergreen—clearly, as described here, some of the most stupefyingly awful products of Britain's Golden Age of Detection. This series tends to divide readers into pro- and anti-Paris camps—if you join me among the pro group, you'll find the wit and the satirical picture of British show biz as en-

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joyable as ever. Some readers from both camps will justifiably fret over Charles' continued hard drinking.

There are some writers so important to the mystery field that all their works should be in print all the time, and surely one of these is John Dickson Carr. Two from his peak period of the Thirties, both starring his most famous sleuth, Dr. Gideon Fell, are available in new paperback editions: *The Crooked Hinge* (1938) and *The Arabian Nights Murder* (1936) —Harper and Row, $3.95 each. The former, a claimant mystery as well as a locked-room puzzle, is the better of the two and one of the finest pure detective stories ever written, but both are recommended to admirers of the Golden Age detective novel at its best.

Fourteen writers well known in mystery, horror, and/or science fiction create new adventures for the Caped Crusader in *The Further Adventures of Batman* (Bantam, $3.95), edited by Martin H. Greenberg. Batman was far and away the favorite comic-book superhero of my youth, perhaps because his games-playing proclivities suggest a certain affinity with Ellery Queen. Among the contributors are Robert Sheckley, Henry Slesar, Joe R. Lansdale, Max Allan Collins, William F. Nolan, and Edward D. Hoch—and most of them strike just the right balance of straightfaced tongue-in-cheek batsmanship. My favorite story is Stuart M. Kaminsky's "The Batman Memos," a Hollywood adventure that is also a pastiche of the inter-office-missive style of David O. Selznick's published memos.

Look among the "instant remainders" for another unusual new anthology, *A Treasury of American Mystery Stories* (Avenel), edited by Frank D. McSherry, Jr., Charles G. Waugh, and the omnipresent Greenberg. Locales of the 51 stories include all the states plus the District of Columbia. Most are reprints, at least a third from *EQMM,* but three states demanded the commissioning of originals: Idaho, Kansas, and North Dakota, covered in short-shorts by Edward D. Hoch as R. L. Stevens, Hoch as himself, and Barry N. Malzberg.

Mystery Readers Journal, edited by Janet A. Rudolph, is a fine quarterly fanzine specializing in thematic issues, most recently "Murder on the Job" (Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer 1989). Past themes included medical, academic, religious, and sports mysteries, with issues on legal and bibliographic mysteries soon to come. Contributors include both knowledgable fans (Sue Feder, Marvin Lachman, William Deeck) and mystery pros (Ed Gorman, Meredith Phillips, Nancy Pickard, Herbert Resnicow). The journal is included in a $20.00-per-year membership ($30.00 overseas) in Mystery Readers International, P.O. Box 8116, Berkeley, CA 94707.

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a reprint especially for Christmas by

RICHARD SELZER

In the January 1971 issue, we published in our Department of First Stories "A Single Minute of Fear" by the distinguished Richard Selzer, whose nonfiction books—Rituals of Surgery, Mortal Lessons, Confessions of a Knife, Letters to a Young Doctor—*have since won him an impressive following and* Esquire *magazine the National Magazine Award. The following is an excerpt from his piece, "Diary of an Infidel," from his most recent collection,* Taking the World In for Repairs, *published by Morrow. It is set in a monastery on the edge of Venice, where the author, who is a surgeon as well as a writer, stayed for some weeks. We have titled the excerpt "Adele Cleary"—with love—for reasons that will soon become clear . . .*

ADELE CLEARY

by RICHARD SELZER

I have been given the run of the monastery. Only the cells of the monks continue to be forbidden me. The complex of buildings is vast and the monks, engaged in their prayers and duties, are largely invisible. A whole day will go by without my meeting one of them. On the occasion that I do, the monumental silhouette floats near, lowers its head, and hurries past with, at most, a whispered "*Buon giorno.*" More is not permitted. For one who believes that a good chat is the highest development of civilization, this interdiction of conversation is hard to bear.

I miss that low hum, more audible to the heart than to the ear, by which a lived-in house announces itself. Sometimes, while sitting

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in the park or while writing at my desk, I have the feeling that I am not alone, that others are present. I know they are not. Still, I turn around to see. And sometimes I think—Good Lord!—perhaps the whole of the community who lived here has fled, and to the millennium of spiritual influence now I alone stand heir.

A great drowsiness has come over me, as though the air here were webbed and I trapped within it. I relieve myself of a dozen yawns an hour. As many as a monk does prayers. No sooner is one yawn expelled with jaw-dislocating emphasis than the next bubble gathers in my head. By tomorrow I shall be in deep coma. In such a convalescent state, for that is what I have diagnosed it to be, I can explore only by small ambitions, hithering and thithering as far as the Conclave Room for a long solitary sit-down, lethargic as a turtle on a sunny rock; on to the sacristy—another daydream; then up to the top of the companile, where I feel like a muezzin on a mosque.

Once again Padre Abate has refused to let me work. Oh, well, if there is nothing whatever to do here, then I am just the man to do it. Every evening I return from a ramble in the cloister to find that my room has been swept clean, the cigarette ashes taken away, and the bed which I had made remade according to some fierce precision of which I am ignorant. Who did it? The angels?

Time and again the great church of San Giorgio Maggiore coaxes me inside her. I have taken to sitting there at odd hours. Truth to tell, I am far more attracted to the bells, incense, and statues of a religion than I am to its dogma or Talmud. It is the child in me craving diversion. And this church is brimful of spectacle, what with John the Baptist shaggy on the wall, Lazarus half in and half out of his shroud, and, of course, Saint George in full metallic fig.

In the absence of human beings, I have been keeping company with the statuary. Just today in the church at twilight a grey angel soared over my head. I could feel the breeze of its passing. But what is this! In the midst of perfection I have discovered that one of the host of angels, the third to the left of the main altar, has been imperfectly rendered, one wing being rather too centrally rooted at the back, and more than a little lower in its thoracic attachment than the other wing. The corresponding shoulder droops, giving a kyphoscoliosis of the spine. Such an angel would hover askew, list to the affected side. Here, I think, is a cockeyed creature made from a bumpy hunk of marble by hands less skilled than willing.

Still, something about her miscreation is endearing, as though her sculptor had not yet learned the dishonesties of art. I say "her"

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because of all the race of angels on this island, only this one suggests specificity of gender. Aside from Michael, Gabriel, and the one who wrestled with Jacob, about whose masculinity there has never been any doubt, the others are sexually indeterminate. The gender of angels is not readily told. One does not turn them upside down to see. Nor is it of the least importance, as the whole idea, I gather, is that they be neuter. But this crookback to the left of the altar is, beyond peradventure of doubt, womanly—the female of the species. It is something about the elbows, the knees, whatever.

Nor does she have the basic seraph's countenance, with plump cheeks and serene brow all framed by ringlets. Instead, she is stringy. All wrists and ribs. The face, too, owns a certain gauntness of features, the suggestion of fatigue. The mouth is a thin slit; the expression is less one of ecstasy than of endurance. This face has witnessed; it has tolerated. Now and then I have the fleeting thought that I have seen this face before. But where? Whose is it?

It is three midnights later. I awake suddenly and lie there in bed rummaging about in what I used to call my mind. All at once, I am bolt upright. In a moment I have pulled on my clothes, grabbed candlestick and matches, and am racing along the hallway, down a flight of stairs. I push open the side door of the church. It is full, still, of the sweet smell of incense. And, oh, that black that does not hold itself back but comes charging at you like a panther. I light the match, touch it to the taper. But why do my hands tremble so? I watch my shadow become involved with the dormant church as the flame is batted in the draft. The great altar looms. Now to the left. One. Two. Three. And I hold up the candle at arm's length. Flashes of gold from the monstrance. The stillness rages in the very pillars. And I know. I am certain.

Some months before I left New Haven, a nurse who had worked in the recovery room retired. For thirty-five years, each day, Adele Cleary had received into her care dozens of postoperative patients, each of whom shared the single condition of unconsciousness, being either fully anesthetized or in emergence from that state. Upon leaving, they would be amnesic for their time spent in this room. While one would flail about in danger of injuring himself, another, driven by some drug-released urge toward violence, would strike out at those who tended him.

I remember one of her black eyes. Part of the job, Adele had said afterward. Still another patient would vomit or choke or suffer car-

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diac arrest and so must be resuscitated by mouth-to-mouth breathing, and receive a beating upon the chest to coax back a heart in standstill. Nor did a single one of her patients remember Adele. Were she later to pass one of them in the street, he would give no sign of recognition.

To all of this Adele presented an unruffled expression. It was more than tolerance or endurance; it was acceptance, it was obedience. Adele Cleary was a hunchback. Despite the fact of her crooked spine, which was ill-concealed and even accentuated by the thin blue scrub dress she wore at work, there was no awkwardness in her ministrations. In the recovery room, if nowhere else, she was graceful. At her retirement she was presented with a purse containing one hundred dollars collected from the others. The chief of surgery proposed a toast with ginger ale.

"What are you going to do now, Adele?" he asked. "Are you going to travel? Or just loaf?"

"Now?" said Adele with a shy smile. "Now I am going to recover from my life."

I saw her once after that. There is a small park in the center of New Haven. It is called The Green. In good weather, people go there to eat lunch, play chess, or walk their dogs. One day I was crossing The Green on some errand or other when I caught sight of her sitting alone on one of the benches that line the paths. Several people walked by. All at once she rose and walked quickly to catch up with a man who had just passed. When she had come within arm's length, she raised one hand to touch his sleeve. I saw the man turn, look at her for a moment without expression, then wheel and walk briskly away. After a moment, Adele returned to her seat. I stopped to talk.

"Who was that?" I asked her. We were that easy with each other.

"Oh," she said. "Someone I thought I knew. But I guess not."

"One of your patients?" I said. Adele smiled and looked at something farther and farther away from her body.

Later that day, sitting in my office at the hospital, I thought of her again, of how many thousands of people in the city she had steadied and thumped and rubbed and blown into; of all the vomitus and phlegm and blood with which she had been spattered; of all the prophecies she had sown: "You are going to be all right," "Pretty soon you'll be back in your own bed"; all her crooning, her coaxing back, her padding against mindless battering; all those magic acts

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of intercession; that endless braiding of tubes and wires about pale sick faces. And no one could remember having seen her!

Before I left for Italy, I saw her name in the obituary column. Isn't that just the way? You work all your life, and the minute you stop and begin to enjoy . . .

For a long while I gaze up at the statue of the angel, the third from the left of the main altar, the hot wax from the taper begloving my hand in tightness and heat which races up the arm and across the chest where the heart beats hard against it. Look! She bends to peer at me, lifts one hand as if to wipe a brow, then slowly relents into marble. So! Adele, I say aloud. I might have known.

Minutes later, back in my room, I snuff the taper. There is the sad smell of candlewick. And the singing of wings.

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"My mum wants me home for Christmas," the seventeen-year-old murder suspect told Horace Rumpole.

Which Christmas? would have been an unreasonable remark and Rumpole refrained from it. Instead he said, "All things are possible . . ."

RUMPOLE AND THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

by JOHN MORTIMER

I realized that Christmas was upon us when I saw a sprig of holly over the list of prisoners hung on the wall of the cells under the Old Bailey.

I pulled out a new box of small cigars and found its opening obstructed by a tinseled band on which a scarlet-faced Santa was seen hurrying a sleigh full of carcinoma-packed goodies to the Rejoicing World. I lit one as the lethargic screw, with a complexion the color of faded Bronco, regretfully left his doorstep sandwich and mug of sweet tea to unlock the gate.

"Good morning, Mr. Rumpole. Come to visit a customer?"

"Happy Christmas, officer," I said as cheerfully as possible. "Is Mr. Timson at home?"

"Well, I don't believe he's slipped down to his little place in the country."

Such were the pleasantries that were exchanged between us legal hacks and discontented screws; jokes that no doubt have changed little since the turnkeys unlocked the door at Newgate to let in a pessimistic advocate, or the cells under the Coliseum were opened to admit the unwelcome news of the Imperial thumbs-down.

"My mum wants me home for Christmas."

Which Christmas? It would have been an unreasonable remark and I refrained from it. Instead, I said, "All things are possible."

As I sat in the interviewing room, an Old Bailey hack of some

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considerable experience, looking through my brief and inadvertently using my waistcoat as an ashtray, I hoped I wasn't on another loser. I had had a run of bad luck during that autumn season, and young Edward Timson was part of that huge south London family whose criminal activities provided such welcome grist to the Rumpole mill. The charge in the seventeen-year-old Eddie's case was nothing less than wilful murder.

"We're in with a chance, though, Mr. Rumpole, ain't we?"

Like all his family, young Timson was a confirmed optimist. And yet, of course, the merest outsider in the Grand National, the hundred-to-one shot, is in with a chance, and nothing is more like going round the course at Aintree than living through a murder trial. In this particular case, a fanatical prosecutor named Wrigglesworth, known to me as the Mad Monk, was to represent Beechers, and Mr. Justice Vosper, a bright but wintry-hearted judge who always felt it his duty to lead for the prosecution, was to play the part of a particularly menacing fence at the Canal Turn.

"A chance. Well, yes, of course you've got a chance, if they can't establish common purpose, and no one knows which of you bright lads had the weapon."

No doubt the time had come for a brief glance at the prosecution case, not an entirely cheering prospect. Eddie, also known as "Turpin" Timson, lived in a kind of decaying barracks, a sort of highrise Lubianka, known as Keir Hardie Court, somewhere in south London, together with his parents, his various brothers, and his thirteen-year-old sister, Noreen. This particular branch of the Timson family lived on the thirteenth floor. Below them, on the twelfth, lived the large clan of the O'Dowds. The war between the Timsons and the O'Dowds began, it seems, with the casting of the Nativity play at the local comprehensive school.

Christmas comes earlier each year and the school show was planned about September. When Bridget O'Dowd was chosen to play the lead in the face of strong competition from Noreen Timson, an incident occurred comparable in historical importance to the assassination of an obscure Austrian archduke at Sarejevo. Noreen Timson announced in the playground that Bridget O'Dowd was a spotty little tart quite unsuited to play any role of which the most notable characteristic was virginity.

Hearing this, Bridget O'Dowd kicked Noreen Timson behind the anthracite bunkers. Within a few days, war was declared between the Timson and O'Dowd children, and a present of lit fireworks was

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posted through the O'Dowd front door. On what is known as the "night in question," reinforcements of O'Dowds and Timsons arrived in old bangers from a number of south London addresses and battle was joined on the stone staircase, a bleak terrain of peeling walls scrawled with graffiti, blowing empty Coca-Cola tins and torn newspapers. The weapons seemed to have been articles in general domestic use, such as bread knives, carving knives, broom handles, and a heavy screwdriver. At the end of the day it appeared that the upstairs flat had repelled the invaders, and Kevin O'Dowd lay on the stairs. Having been stabbed with a slender and pointed blade, he was in a condition to become known as the "deceased" in the case of the Queen against Edward Timson. I made an application for bail for my client which was refused, but a speedy trial was ordered.

So even as Bridget O'Dowd was giving her Virgin Mary at the comprehensive, the rest of the family was waiting to give evidence against Eddie Timson in that home of British drama, Number One Court at the Old Bailey.

"I never had no cutter, Mr. Rumpole. Straight up, I never had one," the defendant told me in the cells. He was an appealing-looking lad with soft brown eyes, who had already won the heart of the highly susceptible lady who wrote his social inquiry report. ("Although the charge is a serious one, this is a young man who might respond well to a period of probation." I could imagine the steely contempt in Mr. Justice Vosper's eye when he read that.)

"Well, tell me, Edward. Who had?"

"I never seen no cutters on no one, honest I didn't. We wasn't none of us tooled up, Mr. Rumpole."

"Come on, Eddie. Someone must have been. They say even young Noreen was brandishing a potato peeler."

"Not me, honest."

"What about your sword?"

There was one part of the prosecution evidence that I found particularly distasteful. It was agreed that on the previous Sunday morning, Eddie "Turpin" Timson had appeared on the stairs of Keir Hardie Court and flourished what appeared to be an antique cavalry saber at the assembled O'Dowds, who were just popping out to Mass.

"Me sword I bought up the Portobello? I didn't have that there, honest."

"The prosecution can't introduce evidence about the sword. It was an entirely different occasion." Mr. Barnard, my instructing solicitor who fancied himself as an infallible lawyer, spoke with a confidence

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which I couldn't feel. He, after all, wouldn't have to stand up on his hind legs and argue the legal toss with Mr. Justice Vosper.

"It rather depends on who's prosecuting us. I mean, if it's some fairly reasonable fellow—"

"I think," Mr. Barnard reminded me, shattering my faint optimism and ensuring that we were all in for a very rough Christmas indeed, "I think it's Mr. Wrigglesworth. Will he try to introduce the sword?"

I looked at "Turpin" Timson with a kind of pity. "If it is the Mad Monk, he undoubtedly will."

When I went into Court, Basil Wrigglesworth was standing with his shoulders hunched up round his large, red ears, his gown dropped to his elbows, his bony wrists protruding from the sleeves of his frayed jacket, his wig pushed back, and his huge hands joined on his lectern in what seemed to be an attitude of devoted prayer. A lump of cotton wool clung to his chin where he had cut himself shaving. Although well into his sixties, he preserved a look of boyish clumsiness. He appeared, as he always did when about to prosecute on a charge carrying a major punishment, radiantly happy.

"Ah, Rumpole," he said, lifting his eyes from the police verbals as though they were his breviary. "Are you defending *as usual?"*

"Yes, Wrigglesworth. And you're prosecuting *as usual?"* It wasn't much of a riposte but it was all I could think of at the time.

"Of course, I don't defend. One doesn't like to call witnesses who may not be telling the truth."

"You must have a few unhappy moments then, calling certain members of the Constabulary."

"I can honestly tell you, Rumpole—" his curiously innocent blue eyes looked at me with a sort of pain, as though I had questioned the doctrine of the immaculate conception "—I have never called a dishonest policeman."

"Yours must be a singularly simple faith, Wrigglesworth."

"As for the Detective Inspector in this case," counsel for the prosecution went on, "I've known Wainwright for years. In fact, this is his last trial before he retires. He could no more invent a verbal against a defendant than fly."

Any more on that tack, I thought, and we should soon be debating how many angels could dance on the point of a pin.

"Look here, Wrigglesworth. That evidence about my client having a sword: it's quite irrelevant. I'm sure you'd agree."

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"Why is it irrelevant?" Wrigglesworth frowned.

"Because the murder clearly wasn't done with an antique cavalry saber. It was done with a small, thin blade."

"If he's a man who carries weapons, why isn't that relevant?"

"A man? Why do you call him a man? He's a child. A boy of seventeen!"

"Man enough to commit a serious crime."

"*If* he did."

"If he didn't, he'd hardly be in the dock."

"That's the difference between us, Wrigglesworth," I told him. "I believe in the presumption of innocence. You believe in original sin. Look here, old darling." I tried to give the Mad Monk a smile of friendship and became conscious of the fact that it looked, no doubt, like an ingratiating sneer. "Give us a chance. You won't introduce the evidence of the sword, will you?"

"Why ever not?"

"Well," I told him, "the Timsons are an industrious family of criminals. They work hard, they never go on strike. If it weren't for people like the Timsons, you and I would be out of a job."

"They sound in great need of prosecution and punishment. Why shouldn't I tell the jury about your client's sword? Can you give me one good reason?"

"Yes," I said, as convincingly as possible.

"What is it?" He peered at me, I thought, unfairly.

"Well, after all," I said, doing my best, "it is Christmas."

It would be idle to pretend that the first day in Court went well, although Wrigglesworth restrained himself from mentioning the sword in his opening speech, and told me that he was considering whether or not to call evidence about it the next day. I cross-examined a few members of the clan O'Dowd on the presence of lethal articles in the hands of the attacking force. The evidence about this varied, and weapons came and went in the hands of the inhabitants of Number Twelve as the witnesses were blown hither and thither in the winds of Rumpole's cross-examination. An interested observer from one of the other flats spoke of having seen a machete.

"Could that terrible weapon have been in the hands of Mr. Kevin O'Dowd, the deceased in this case?"

"I don't think so."

"But can you rule out the possibility?"

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"No, I can't rule it out," the witness admitted, to my temporary delight.

"You can never rule out the possibility of anything in this world, Mr. Rumpole. But he doesn't think so. You have your answer."

Mr. Justice Vosper, in a voice like a splintering iceberg, gave me this unwelcome Christmas present. The case wasn't going well, but at least, by the end of the first day, the Mad Monk had kept out all mention of the sword. The next day he was to call young Bridget O'Dowd, fresh from her triumph in the Nativity play.

"I say, Rumpole, I'd be *so* grateful for a little help."

I was in Pommeroy's Wine Bar, drowning the sorrows of the day in my usual bottle of the cheapest Chateau Fleet Street (made from grapes which, judging from the bouquet, might have been not so much trodden as kicked to death by sturdy peasants in gum boots) when I looked up to see Wrigglesworth, dressed in an old mackintosh, doing business with Jack Pommeroy at the sales counter. When I crossed to him, he was not buying the jumbo-sized bottle of ginger beer which I imagined might be his celebratory Christmas tipple, but a tempting and respectably aged bottle of Chateau Pichon Longueville.

"What can I do for you, Wrigglesworth?"

"Well, as you know, Rumpole, I live in Croydon."

"Happiness is given to few of us on this earth," I said piously.

"And the Anglican Sisters of St. Agnes, Croydon, are anxious to buy a present for their Bishop," Wrigglesworth explained. "A dozen bottles for Christmas. They've asked my advice, Rumpole. I know so little of wine. You wouldn't care to try this for me? I mean, if you're not especially busy."

"I should be hurrying home to dinner." My wife, Hilda (She Who Must Be Obeyed), was laying on rissoles and frozen peas, washed down by my last bottle of Pommeroy's extremely ordinary. "However, as it's Christmas, I don't mind helping you out, Wrigglesworth."

The Mad Monk was clearly quite unused to wine. As we sampled the claret together, I saw the chance of getting him to commit himself on the vital question of the evidence of the sword, as well as absorbing an unusually decent bottle. After the Pichon Longueville I was kind enough to help him by sampling a Boyd-Cantenac and then I said, "Excellent, this. But of course the Bishop might be a burgundy man. The nuns might care to invest in a decent Macon."

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"Shall we try a bottle?" Wrigglesworth suggested. "I'd be grateful for your advice."

"I'll do my best to help you, my old darling. And while we're on the subject, that ridiculous bit of evidence about young Timson and the sword—"

"I remember you saying I shouldn't bring that out because it's Christmas."

"Exactly." Jack Pommeroy had uncorked the Macon and it was mingling with the claret to produce a feeling of peace and goodwill towards men. Wrigglesworth frowned, as though trying to absorb an obscure point of theology.

"I don't quite see the relevance of Christmas to the question of your man Timson threatening his neighbors with a sword."

"Surely, Wrigglesworth—" I knew my prosecutor well "—you're of a religious disposition?" The Mad Monk was the product of some bleak northern Catholic boarding school. He lived alone, and no doubt wore a hair shirt under his black waistcoat and was vowed to celibacy. The fact that he had his nose deep into a glass of burgundy at the moment was due to the benign influence of Rumpole.

"I'm a Christian, yes."

"Then practice a little Christian tolerance."

"Tolerance towards evil?"

"Evil?" I asked. "What do you mean, evil?"

"Couldn't that be your trouble, Rumpole? That you really don't recognize evil when you see it."

"I suppose," I said, "evil might be locking up a seventeen-year-old during Her Majesty's pleasure, when Her Majesty may very probably forget all about him, banging him up with a couple of hard and violent cases and their own chamber-pots for twenty-two hours a day, so he won't come out till he's a real, genuine, middle-aged murderer."

"I did hear the Reverend Mother say—" Wrigglesworth was gazing vacantly at the empty Macon bottle "—that the Bishop likes his glass of port."

"Then in the spirit of Christmas tolerance I'll help you to sample some of Pommeroy's Light and Tawny."

A little later, Wrigglesworth held up his port glass in a reverent sort of fashion.

"You're suggesting, are you, that I should make some special concession in this case because it's Christmastime?"

"Look here, old darling." I absorbed half my glass, relishing the

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gentle fruitiness and the slight tang of wood. "If you spent your whole life in that highrise hell-hole called Keir Hardie Court, if you had no fat prosecutions to occupy your attention and no prospect of any job at all, if you had no sort of occupation except war with the O'Dowds—"

"My own flat isn't particularly comfortable. I don't know a great deal about *your* home life, Rumpole, but you don't seem to be in a tearing hurry to experience it."

"Touché, Wrigglesworth, my old darling." I ordered us a couple of refills of Pommeroy's port to further postpone the encounter with She Who Must Be Obeyed and her rissoles.

"But we don't have to fight to the death on the staircase," Wrigglesworth pointed out.

"We don't have to fight at all, Wrigglesworth."

"As your client did."

"As my client *may* have done. Remember the presumption of innocence."

"This is rather funny, this is." The prosecutor pulled back his lips to reveal strong, yellowish teeth and laughed appreciatively. "You know why your man Timson is called 'Turpin'?"

"No." I drank port uneasily, fearing an unwelcome revelation.

"Because he's always fighting with that sword of his. He's called after Dick Turpin, you see, who's always dueling on the television. Do you watch the television, Rumpole?"

"Hardly at all."

"I watch a great deal of the television, as I'm alone rather a lot." Wrigglesworth referred to the box as though it were a sort of penance, like fasting or flagellation. "Detective Inspector Wainwright told me about your client. Rather amusing, I thought it was. He's retiring this Christmas."

"My client?"

"No. D.I. Wainwright. Do you think we should settle on this port for the Bishop? Or would you like to try a glass of something else?"

"Christmas," I told Wrigglesworth severely as we sampled the Cockburn, "is not just a material, pagan celebration. It's not just an occasion for absorbing superior vintages, old darling. It must be a time when you try to do good, spiritual good to our enemies."

"To your client, you mean?"

"And to me."

"To you, Rumpole?"

"For God's sake, Wrigglesworth!" I was conscious of the fact that

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my appeal was growing desperate. "I've had six losers in a row down the Old Bailey. Can't I be included in any Christmas spirit that's going around?"

"You mean, at Christmas especially it is more blessed to give than to receive?"

"I mean exactly that." I was glad that he seemed, at last, to be following my drift.

"And you think I might give this case to someone, like a Christmas present?"

"If you care to put it that way, yes."

"I do not care to put it in *exactly* that way." He turned his pale-blue eyes on me with what I thought was genuine sympathy. "But I shall try and do the case of R. *v.* Timson in the way most appropriate to the greatest feast of the Christian year. It is a time, I quite agree, for the giving of presents."

When they finally threw us out of Pommeroy's, and after we had considered the possibility of buying the Bishop brandy in the Cock Tavern, and even beer in the Devereux, I let my instinct, like an aged horse, carry me on to the Underground and home to Gloucester Road, and there discovered the rissoles, like some traces of a vanished civilization, fossilized in the oven. She Who Must Be Obeyed was already in bed, feigning sleep. When I climbed in beside her, she opened a hostile eye.

"You're drunk, Rumpole!" she said. "What on earth have you been doing?"

"I've been having a legal discussion," I told her, "on the subject of the admissibility of certain evidence. Vital, from my client's point of view. And, just for a change, Hilda, I think I've won."

"Well, you'd better try and get some sleep." And she added with a sort of satisfaction, "I'm sure you'll be feeling quite terrible in the morning."

As with all the grimmer predictions of She Who Must Be Obeyed, this one turned out to be true. I sat in Court the next day with the wig feeling like a lead weight on the brain and the stiff collar sawing the neck like a blunt execution. My mouth tasted of matured bird-cage and from a long way off I heard Wrigglesworth say to Bridget O'Dowd, who stood looking particularly saintly and virginal in the witness-box, "About a week before this, did you see the defendant, Edward Timson, on your staircase flourishing any sort of weapon?"

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It is no exaggeration to say that I felt deeply shocked and considerably betrayed. After his promise to me, Wrigglesworth had turned his back on the spirit of the great Christmas festival. He came not to bring peace but a sword.

I clambered with some difficulty to my feet. After my forensic efforts of the evening before, I was scarcely in the mood for a legal argument. Mr. Justice Vosper looked up in surprise and greeted me in his usual chilly fashion.

"Yes, Mr. Rumpole. Do you object to this evidence?"

Of course I object, I wanted to say. It's inhuman, unnecessary, unmerciful, and likely to lead to my losing another case. Also, it's clearly contrary to a solemn and binding contract entered into after a number of glasses of the Bishop's putative port. All I seemed to manage was a strangled, "Yes."

"I suppose Mr. Wrigglesworth would say—" Vosper, J., was, as ever, anxious to supply any argument that might not yet have occurred to the prosecution "—that it is evidence of 'system.' "

"System?" I heard my voice faintly and from a long way off. "It may be, I suppose. But the Court has a discretion to omit evidence which may be irrelevant and purely prejudicial."

"I feel sure Mr. Wrigglesworth has considered the matter most carefully and that he would not lead this evidence unless he considered it entirely relevant."

I looked at the Mad Monk on the seat beside me. He was smiling at me with a mixture of hearty cheerfulness and supreme pity, as though I were sinking rapidly and he had come to administer supreme unction. I made a few ill-chosen remarks to the Court, but I was in no condition, that morning, to enter into a complicated legal argument on the admissibility of evidence.

It wasn't long before Bridget O'Dowd had told a deeply disapproving jury all about Eddie "Turpin" Timson's sword. "A man," the judge said later in his summing up about young Edward, "clearly prepared to attack with cold steel whenever it suited him."

When the trial was over, I called in for refreshment at my favorite watering hole and there, to my surprise, was my opponent Wrigglesworth, sharing an expensive-looking bottle with Detective Inspector Wainwright, the officer in charge of the case. I stood at the bar, absorbing a consoling glass of Pommeroy's ordinary, when the D.I. came up to the bar for cigarettes. He gave me a friendly and maddeningly sympathetic smile.

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"Sorry about that, sir. Still, win a few, lose a few. Isn't that it?"

"In my case lately, it's been win a few, lose a lot!"

"You couldn't have this one, sir. You see, Mr. Wrigglesworth had promised it to me."

"He had *what?*"

"Well, I'm retiring, as you know. And Mr. Wrigglesworth promised me faithfully that my last case would be a win. He promised me that, in a manner of speaking, as a Christmas present. Great man is our Mr. Wrigglesworth, sir, for the spirit of Christmas."

I looked across at the Mad Monk and a terrible suspicion entered my head. What was all that about a present for the Bishop? I searched my memory and I could find no trace of our having, in fact, bought wine for any sort of cleric. And was Wrigglesworth as inexperienced as he would have had me believe in the art of selecting claret?

As I watched him pour and sniff a glass from his superior bottle and hold it critically to the light, a horrible suspicion crossed my mind. Had the whole evening's events been nothing but a deception, a sinister attempt to nobble Rumpole, to present him with such a stupendous hangover that he would stumble in his legal argument? Was it all in aid of D.I. Wainwright's Christmas present?

I looked at Wrigglesworth, and it would be no exaggeration to say the mind boggled. He was, of course, perfectly right about me. I just didn't recognize evil when I saw it.

DETECTIVERSE

INSUFFICIENT PENCE FOR THE DEFENSE

by MARY T. DANIELS

"Rumpole," began the tirade
From She Who Must Be Obeyed,
"At the Bailey, your bailiwick,
You help thieves avoid the nick
But our bills show that crime hasn't paid."

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When Max came home from the mill after work, Claudine met him on the porch in front of their mobile home. "I told you my luck would change," she said, handing him half of a pink ticket-stub. Max eyed her suspiciously. "What is it?"

"It's the ticket that's going to put us on Easy Street," she told him. "Just wait and see . . ."

JUST WAIT AND SEE

by ELIZABETH A. DALTON

"I tell you, Max, my luck's going to change," Claudine said. "Just wait and see."

Max leaned forward and shook his dinner fork. "Bosh! You haven't hit the jackpot, or any other for that matter, and you're not going to!"

"I tell you I am," Claudine argued.

"N-O, no. Do you hear? No more Bingo. No more pull-tabs. No more football pools. No more racetrack. No more gambling. Or did you forget about the little black book?"

"How could I forget that blasted black book? You've thrown it in my face for at least ten years."

"And I'll continue to remind you about it as long as you keep driving us straight for the poorhouse." Max then pushed his plate to the center of the table, stood up, and disappeared down the hallway.

Five minutes later, he returned and tossed a small cheap spiral binder on the table.

Claudine stared at the book a minute. "I know, Max. You've been diligent. You've recorded every red cent I've spent in the past ten years on my—my pastime."

"Pastime?" he barked. *"Pastime?* Sickness. That's what it is, a

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sickness. Every time you get the fever you're off, blowing money right and left and thinking this time your ship's coming in."

"Oh?" Claudine glared at her husband. "Wait and see."

Max ignored her, picked up the black book from the table, licked his index finger, and thumbed through the pages. "Nineteen eighty. You spent almost twenty-five hundred dollars on your pastime." He licked his finger again. "Nineteen eighty-seven. Almost eight thousand that year. Claudine, that's the price of a good car."

She stood up, plucking an armload of serving dishes from the table. "Money. That's all you think about."

Max walked over, opened the apartment-size refrigerator, and reached for a cold beer. "Something wrong with this cooler?" he asked. "The beer's warm."

Claudine raised a sharp eyebrow. "So now you worry about the appliances in this dump? It's never mind if the food spoils, but let your beer come out of the box at room temperature and you're upset. If you weren't such a skinflint, we'd have one of those new double-door fridges with an icemaker."

"Quit nagging, okay, Claudine?" He popped the beer top and took a long drink.

"Quit nagging?" she whined. "I will. I won't say another word about you being a tightwad and a miser if you'll quit nagging about my pastime."

"Agreed," he said tiredly. "But, remember—I'm still keeping score."

And he returned the black book to the closet where it shared a shelf with a copy of Claudine's life-insurance policy.

A few weeks later, when Max came home from the mill after work, Claudine met him on the porch in front of their mobile home. "I told you my luck would change."

"What?"

She handed him half of a pink ticket-stub.

Max eyed her suspiciously. "What is it?"

"It's the ticket that's going to put us on Easy Street. Just wait and see."

"You've been gambling again," he said flatly. He followed her into the house.

"Aren't you curious about this ticket?"

Max admitted he was. "Did you win a new car?"

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She shook her head. "Better than that. It's worth round-trip air fare for you and me plus three nights' lodging at a grand hotel."

"And that's better than a new car? How much did you spend to win this free trip?"

"Not much. Only three chances for a buck."

Max eyed her closely. "And you saw your way clear to buy how many?"

She shrugged, then said, "Two hundred and ten, to be exact." Let Max log that in his black book, she thought. Her luck had changed. She felt it in her bones.

Two weeks later, Max and Claudine checked into a towering hotel in a world-famous gambling city, rode the elevator to the top, and entered the prize winners' suite.

Claudine walked across the room, opened the wide glass door, and stepped outside onto a large terrace. She moved to the iron rail and admired the river below and a long line of snow-capped mountains to the west. "Look at the view," she called in to Max. "It won't be long before we'll be sitting on our very own patio anyplace in the world we want. Sipping champagne and smelling high desert air in the summer. In the winter, I'll bundle up in a fur wrap and watch the first snowline appear on some faroff mountain peak."

"And where are you going to get the dough to go along with these high-flying plans?" Max asked.

"I told you. My luck's changed. We're going to be rich. Just wait and see."

For the next two days, Claudine moved through the casino like a tornado. She pulled the slot machines, played Black Jack, bet at the roulette, and entered her name in every contest sponsored by the casino.

Max, who followed at her heels with the black book tucked in his hip pocket, periodically stopped and tallied the fortune Claudine was squandering to get rich.

The second night, it happened. Claudine's luck seemed to change. Her ticket was pulled from a wire tub in the daily mega-buck drawing.

"See—I told you," she said as they pushed their way through a crowd of spectators gathered near the man who'd made the mega-buck-winner announcement.

After Claudine hailed the announcer, she caught sight of the cage

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directly behind him. It was a tall glass contrivance and the floor was covered with a thick carpet of every denomination of greenbacks.

"Here's the lucky lady now," the man cried as Claudine approached. "Ready to go in and clean up the litter on the floor in there?"

While the onlookers laughed, Claudine nodded, feeling strange. Two young women dressed in mini-tuxedos appeared, fitted her with a pair of goggles and boxing gloves, and then helped her into the glass dome.

A wave of panic swept through Claudine when the door snapped shut behind her.

"You have sixty seconds to fill the canvas bag, lucky lady," the announcer told her, pointing to a large stopwatch suspended from the ceiling.

As the clock began to tick off the seconds, Max saw Claudine lunge for the glass door and ferociously claw the enclosure like a wounded animal. An onlooker shouted from the crowd, "Quick, open that door and let the lady out! She's having an attack of claustrophobia."

By the time Claudine was carried from the cage, the crowd was buzzing like a hive of bees.

"I'm sorry," she said to Max, who circled a protective arm around her shoulder and helped her onto the elevator.

Upstairs in the suite, he said cheerfully, "Claudine, I think what you need right now is a breath of fresh air and a good stiff drink."

She agreed and stepped outside into the starlit night. "Max, I thought my luck had changed. Believe me, I'll never gamble again."

"I know you won't, dear," he said, bringing her her drink. "It's like I've always said—if it weren't for bad luck, you wouldn't have any luck at all."

He handed her the drink. "I'm sorry, too, Claudine, but I've got to cut my losses." He took the insurance policy and the little black book from his pocket and waved them under her nose. "Right now, we're even, see? The present tally in my little book and the insurance policy's face value are the same—twenty-five thousand."

Claudine retreated until she stumbled and somersaulted over the iron guard-rail, and fell headlong to her death.

Max hurried inside and picked up the telephone.

"This is Room 1911—"

"1911? The Grays?" a woman asked. "This is a coincidence. I was just about to give you a ring."

"There's been an accident," Max cut in, his thoughts on the clause

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he'd read in his wife's life-insurance policy. Double indemnity for accidental death. "Please hurry—call an ambulance! My wife's fallen over the guard-rail!"

After the ambulance and police had gone, Max turned to the hotel manager. "Mr. Carella, you've been very kind."

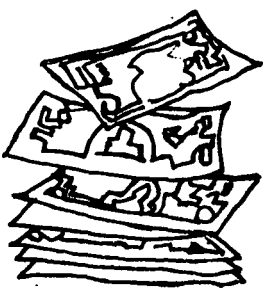
The younger man seemed embarrassed. "First off, Mr. Gray, on behalf of the hotel, the staff extends their condolences." Carella cleared his throat and continued. "If we'd known your wife was claustrophobic, we could have allowed her a spin on the mega-buck wheel rather than subject her to the cage."

"What do you mean?"

The hotel manager's face reddened. "Your wife stood a very good chance of hitting the jackpot on our million-dollar wheel. In any event, at the very minimum, she was guaranteed five hundred thousand."

"Half a million?" Max said weakly.

Carella nodded. "It was decided after your wife had to be carried from the cage. A goodwill gesture, you understand. Most unusual. In fact, this was the first time since the hotel opened that our management's voted to allow one of the daily winners a second chance to try their luck on our ten million mega-buck wheel."



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1989 EQMM READERS AWARD

This year, our fifth year into the annual EQMM Readers Award, we have published 170 short stories, most of them originals, not reprints. Although you are free to vote for a reprint as your favorite EQMM story of the year, your choices thus far have been overwhelmingly for fiction first published in our pages—Clark Howard's "Animals" (1985), "Scalplock" (1986), and "The Dakar Run" (1988), and Robert Barnard's "The Woman in the Wardrobe" (1987).

It is no easy task to choose one most outstanding story from as many as 170—no easy task, in fact, choosing one from among a dozen or half dozen favorites—but don't be daunted by the magnitude of it. Think instead of the significance of the final outcome to the winning author, the joy of learning that his or her story—which will inevitably have been one that exacted an exceptional amount of thought and care—had that great an impact on so many readers.

And there are rewards for those of you who vote as well. Even if the story you vote for doesn't win the award for its author, your editors learn which writers' work you most enjoy and try to bring their work to you as often as we can. Note that past winners Clark Howard and Robert Barnard have both contributed more than one story to *EQMM* this year in spite of their heavy publishing commitments elsewhere.

Your ballot is on page 104. Write the story of your choice in the space provided, and its author. If you can't recall the story by title and/or author, describe it as briefly as you can and send this page from the magazine as your ballot to the address on page 104 by December 31. (Photocopies are unacceptable.) We very much appreciate your participation. Much is said by artists about being celebrated by their peers, and there is definite worth in that, of course, but we believe that writers being celebrated by readers is the ultimate gratification.

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The EQMM Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1990 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot, if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My selection for the 1989 EQMM Readers Award is:

Mail to: The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
380 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10017

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a *NEW* Rosso Pallone story by

TERRY MULLINS

Rosso looked down and saw that his holster was unbuckled. "Good thing you aren't six feet tall," Sergeant Sforza told him. "He'd have had your pistol and shot you while you were pounding his back. It's happened before."

Another procedural about appealing Philadelphia rookie Rosso Pallone from Terry Mullins, whose "A Rabbit or a Skunk" was one of EQMM's best firsts of 1988 . . .

THE SMALL BEARDED MAN

by TERRY MULLINS

During the day, police headquarters isn't a quiet place, but it doesn't usually sound like a boxing arena. So when Rosso Pallone heard an uproar, he slammed his locker shut and headed for the sound. He was facing the door when it burst open and a small bearded man came charging through. The man saw Rosso and rushed him. Rosso grabbed one arm and twisted. The man, who looked like a leprechaun and had the strength of a gorilla, grabbed Rosso's arm and tried to bite him. Rosso slammed him hard against the locker, felt his feet being kicked out from under him, and fell on the man.

Lucy Sforza and two officers arrived and subdued the kicking, spitting, screaming demon before things got serious. "Are you all right, Ross?" she asked.

"I think so. He was trying to bite me."

"He'll try anything. He knew this was the locker room. He was after a gun. One of the most dangerous situations an officer can get into—dealing with a wild, unarmed civilian. He's after your pistol and it's amazing how often he gets it. And kills the officer who was wearing it."

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Rosso looked down and saw that his holster was unbuckled. He hadn't even known the man had a hand free to go for his pistol.

Sergeant Sforza, nine years on the force and slated for promotion to Lieutenant, was from Rosso's own neighborhood, but he hardly knew her. He felt a bit foolish as he buckled his holster and brushed himself off.

"Good thing you aren't six feet tall," she continued. "He'd have had your pistol and shot you while you were pounding on his back. It's happened before."

Half an hour later, the uproar was repeated. Rosso was in the parking lot when he heard the shouts. Two officers were running toward Vine Street. Although he couldn't see the fugitive, Rosso took off at an angle that would put him at Vine ahead of them.

He had covered half the distance when the small man came running out of an alley, his hands cuffed behind him. Rosso caught him with a solid body block and the man went down. Rosso assumed the chase was over, but he was wrong. The man got up and charged him, first straight on and then sideways. Rosso twisted, grabbed the man by the collar and belt, and slammed him into a telephone pole. The two pursuing officers arrived and took over. The man screamed threats.

"I'm a sacred person!" he shouted. "Twice you have violated my holiness! You shall suffer for it. *Paritranaya sadhunam vinashaya ca dushkrtam*—I shall destroy you!"

As they carried him away, he kicked wildly. Rosso followed slowly. There was something about the man's raw hatred that affected him. He was used to anger. His family was hot-tempered and he had grown up with days awash with sudden bursts of emotion, childish quarrels, and family arguments. But all that was intensely personal and forgotten as soon as those involved simmered down. Anger was one of the seven deadly sins, but this man's anger was more like blasphemy. It was deliberate, calculated, violent, and implacable. He hated because he wanted to hate. There was some poison within him that he had to pour out. Rosso shuddered.

At headquarters, Sergeant Sforza ordered the man put in the rubber room until he calmed down.

"Who is he?" Rosso asked. "What's he been arrested for—mass murder?"

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"No," Lucy replied, "he's just a man whose television set was stolen."

"You're kidding!"

She shook her head. "We raided a drug house in the northeast, and along with the heroin and pot we found eleven TV sets. This man heard about it and came down to claim one as his. He identified it and wanted to take it away. We told him it was evidence and that he could claim it after the trial. He wouldn't take no for an answer and became violent. He was all over the place."

"How will you book him?"

"He created a disturbance and resisted several officers, so there are a number of charges we could press, but we'll talk with him again before we decide what to do. He isn't drunk or on drugs as far as we can see."

"What did you mean when you said he was all over the place?"

"You saw him in action. He ran like a rabbit in a vegetable garden. Instead of running out the front door, he bolted back where the television sets were stored, knocked over several boxes of evidence, went through a side door and down the hall. When he found himself facing the door to the jail, he doubled back and out through Communications. Finally he found the locker room and surprised you."

"Well—" Rosso smiled at the Sergeant "—I'm going off duty. Don't turn him loose until I'm on the south side of town."

That was Friday and Rosso had a fairly quiet weekend. On Monday morning, he saw the bearded man again. The little man was standing in the street across from the Police Administration Building hawking newspapers to passing cars. He seemed to be doing well, but his attention was as much on the Administration Building as it was on selling newspapers.

Rosso decided to speak with Sergeant Sforza about it. He met Detective Furr first, however, and told him. They looked out the window and watched the man for a while. "You're right, Ross," Furr said. "He's not missing any sales, but he's remarkably interested in this building."

As the detective spoke, the man took advantage of a sudden flow of traffic to walk half a block down the street. As traffic stopped, he began selling papers again. Furr drummed his fingers on the window ledge. "Now he's studying the place from another angle. That's not a bad dodge, selling papers. You can case a building and make money at the same time."

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"Just last Friday he took a grand tour of the inside of the building," Rosso said. "You'd almost think he was planning to break in."

"Yes, Ross, you would. And you might be right. We've had people try to break in and steal evidence, especially after a big drug bust."

Rosso spent the day writing tickets for parking violations. One expensive car with a single-digit license plate remained parked only a few feet past a fire hydrant for two hours. Rosso ticketed it three times and would have had it towed if it had stayed longer. As it was, he would hear about that.

An hour and a half before the end of his day's work, Rosso again saw the small bearded man. He was driving a red Toyota which was trapped in a line of traffic and couldn't get out. Without appearing to, Rosso watched him. The man turned off the thoroughfare as soon as he could and disappeared. Rosso thought back. Philadelphia is full of red Toyotas and he had seen a good many of them that day—often behind him, turning the corner, and disappearing out of sight. It was possible the man was tailing him, trying to find out his routine. But why? He decided to mention it in his report and to say something to Furr about it.

Furr admitted being puzzled by the man's actions. "He posted bail on Friday," he said, "and gave the name Qualat Jones. He claims to have moved here from Cleveland three years ago. He was quiet and apologetic about his actions, said he just wanted his television back. Sergeant Sforza did a bit of checking. She says he gave his real address and phone number, even owns the house he lives in—all in the name of Qualat Jones.

"But there's nothing on him we can check beyond three years ago. He doesn't remember his address in Cleveland or the name of his high school—he claims he dropped out in his sophomore year. The only thing he knew about Cleveland is that it's in Ohio and its baseball team is the Indians. He never even heard of Bob Feller."

"Bob who?"

"Never mind, Ross. Just be careful walking home."

This time Ross decided to take the Route 13 streetcar. Once on, he walked to the back and watched as 10th Street moved away behind him. He looked for red Toyotas and small bearded men. The only Toyota he saw was driven by a woman. The only bearded men he saw wore yarmulkes.

Tuesday he was assigned to ride with Rashid Cambray, a middle-aged black who had been a Marine, fireman, and ambulance driver

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before joining the Philadelphia police. He was friendly to the point of talking Rosso's ear off. His partner was scheduled to testify in court that day and Cambray was glad to have someone new to talk to.

Sergeant Sforza gave them Qualat Jones' address. "It's in your area," she said. "You might look the place over if you have the chance."

"We'll look it over," said Cambray. "We'll look it over real good. There's a bar in that block and I talk with the owner every few days. He'll be able to tell us something about the guy."

It was after noon before they got to the bar. They drove by Jones' house, one of a series of dilapidated row houses. His had been spruced up and painted yellow. The bar was half a block farther on, and in as bad a condition as any of the row houses. A large neon sign over the front door was dark and the bar was empty except for the owner, a waiter, and a fat woman of indeterminate age. The three blacks greeted Cambray as if it was the high point of their day. When he introduced Rosso, they made jokes about Cambray's white partners. "I don't think you honky cops would venture into this neighborhood without Cambray, would you?" the woman said. Rosso laughed. He had, in fact, never been in this part of Philadelphia, though he had lived in the city all his life.

It was ten minutes before Cambray mentioned Qualat Jones. Their laughter died down. They shook their heads and looked at the woman. "What you want to know about him?" she asked.

"Anything."

"About three years ago, he bought that house, bought it from the city for taxes—paid almost nothing for it, just promised to repair it."

"And did he?"

"Yes. He fixed the roof and put glass in the windows and painted it. After a while he bought the house next to it from the city same as he did his. He moved a young black couple into it and they fixed it up a bit. None of them has anything to do with us. Even the black couple don't speak to us. We been living here all our lives and they move in and treat us like dirt."

Rosso let Cambray carry the ball. The older officer shook his head and asked, "Any of them give any trouble?"

"The white man's been in trouble with the kids ever since he moved in. They threw a pair of sneakers on his television antenna and stole his garbage cans. He cusses them out when he sees them. A couple of high-school kids jumped him and tried to grab his wallet.

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He broke one's arm and bloodied the other's face pretty bad. Then one night three real young kids smashed the side window of his red car and tried to open the glove thing. Then they see him look out the window and they run off. A little bit later he leans out the window with a gun and fires a lot of shots in the direction they ran. He didn't hit nobody and no one called the cops, but the kids keep away from his place when he's around."

"So he has a gun."

"He has lots of guns. I saw him taking two shotguns into his house three months ago. Other people seen him with pistols and boxes of bullets."

Cambray looked at the two men. "Any of your customers talk about this?"

"When they talk about him at all, that's what they say. Lots of guns go in. None come out."

"What does he do for a living?" Cambray asked the woman.

"You tell me. He don't sell drugs—leastwise, not around here. He and the black couple are into something, but nobody knows what."

"What's the name of the black couple?"

"Jane and Henry Smith—they say."

Cambray laughed and they left. "You going to write that up?" Cambray asked Rosso.

"Sure, but why do I have to write up all the reports?"

"That's why I chauffeur all you honkies around—so you can do the paperwork." And he told in detail how his partner, Bart Reilly, had once tricked him into making an arrest so that he, as the arresting officer, had to write up the report. "I make sure it don't happen often," he said.

Rosso photocopied his report on Jones and gave a copy to Detective Furr, who read it over and said, "He seems to have been more the victim than the criminal in these incidents. But he's violent—and it's unusual for a white man to buy a house in a black neighborhood, move in, buy another next door, and rent it to a black couple."

"Maybe he buys arms for the I.R.A. or some Latin revolutionaries."

"It's possible, I suppose, but the guns just seem to go into the house. It sounds more like preparation for a riot or something."

Tuesday passed with no one seeing Jones.

Wednesday, Rosso was back writing parking tickets. A little after ten, he saw the red Toyota. He called in to report it and was told to

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go on as usual—a special team was being sent out to back him up. This was a surprise.

Half an hour later, he saw the results.

The Toyota was turning off his street a quarter of a block away when a patrol car cut it off and another blocked it in. A surprising number of officers, Cambray among them, were suddenly around the red car and the small bearded man was hauled out of the car, kicking, swearing, and fighting in a manner now familiar to Rosso. This time everyone knew what was coming and the scuffle ended quickly. Rosso heard about it from Cambray later.

"Furr, a man from the F.B.I., and another from the C.I.A. got together this morning and checked Jones' description against a list of subversives and agitators. It turned out he's on the list of the F.B.I.'s thirty most wanted. There's a four-year-old warrant out for his arrest.

"He headed a San Diego religious cult called the Shadows of Shiva. They talked about taking over the government and practiced ritual torture. One of the victims died and the whole cult was arrested. Jones, whose real name seems to be Percival Calcutta and whose cult name was Mahes Varam, or Supreme Master, said no human power could hold him, that he would disappear and return to take over the government of California. He was granted bail and disappeared, all right—along with three-quarter of a million dollars from the Shadows of Shiva treasury.

"They think he was planning to start something like the Shadows of Shiva here. He probably felt he had to avenge himself on you because you got the better of him—that isn't supposed to happen to Supreme Masters. Jane and Henry Smith think he's the greatest man on earth. They've been preparing a small group of their friends to receive him. This will put a crimp in their plans.

"Anyway, the F.B.I. was very glad to find him. Sergeant Sforza has him in custody now and we'll turn him over to the F.B.I. as soon as they're ready for him."

"Who made the arrest?"

"Bart Reilly did," Cambray said. "He's in there writing up the report now."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

CAROL CAIL

Ward had left home at twenty, gone to college, joined the Marines, married, raised a family, worked in five different states, visited most of the rest. This house had merely been an overnight stop, a bed-and-breakfast, to him. Until his wife Emily died.

This is Carol Cail's ninth story in EQMM. Her first, "Mrs. Lamb's Nose Dreams," in the December 1973 issue foreshadowed her talent for good, terse stories, with a special gift for humor . . .

MARTHA AND HER BROTHERS

by CAROL CAIL

"Martha! Help!"

She put down her mending, removed the thimble, and pushed out of the platform rocker.

"Martha!"

She waited for the dissolve from *General Hospital* to a detergent commercial before lumbering in the direction of the continued screams.

"Help, help, help—damn it, help!"

Along the hall, through the kitchen, onto the back porch, down the steps she marched. On the grass, she turned, the flat of a hand for sun visor, and looked up at the house.

Ward hung by his fingers from the gutter three stories high. Drawing an imaginary line from his pointing toes to the ground, she found a barberry bush in position. A paint can had already fallen and vomited Traditional Cream there. The aluminum extension-ladder canted at ten o'clock on the clapboard wall.

"Set it up straight," Ward whined over his shoulder. "Hurry!"

Martha swayed her head and sucked her lips together in amused

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exasperation, the way their mother used to when they'd done something childish. She deliberately bent to squeeze a dandelion out of the recently barbered face of lawn before walking back into the house.

"Martha!" his shriek of outraged disbelief followed her till she turned up the audio on the TV.

Resuming the chair and mending, she ignored *One Life To Live* and thought about her own. Seventy-three years in the same house, no husband, no children, no career—she'd been happy with her comfortable, boring routine. Even the years of nursemaiding Dad after his stroke hadn't been bad. She'd looked at it as caring for the big baby she'd never had, and of course the situation was temporary. He'd passed away on a day a lot like this one, close and green-smelling, with thunder menacing in the distance.

The thunder turned out to be Ward, lurching in to darken the doorway. She pretended to be memorizing the soft-drink jingle.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he snarled, shaking his skeletal fingers so they dripped rust flakes on the stringy carpet.

She smiled vaguely. "How did you get down?"

"Sprouted wings," he singsonged unimaginatively. Palming the back of his neck, he glowered from under white furry eyebrows. "Handed myself along the gutter to the porch roof, and dropped and slid down from there."

This was harder to believe than the wings. She covered her surprised admiration by searching her lap for the scissors. He was only a year younger—she couldn't imagine him doing even one chin-up, though they'd swung a mean monkey bar in their youth, she and Ward and their brother Fred.

Surreptitiously she eyed his physique—long-boned, loose-skinned, like Frankenstein's monster turned senior citizen. Too-big shirt and trousers added to the illusion. Mama had always bought them clothes to grow into, and even though he'd stopped growing Ward couldn't break the habit.

Suddenly aware of *him* studying *her,* she crossed her shapeless ankles and orthopedic shoes and serenely jabbed needle into eye of button.

"War, is it?" he said.

Her eyebrows approached her bangs and stayed there as the needle stabbed in and out.

When he stomped away down the hall, she slumped, letting the handiwork slither down her legs. It was his own fault, the old fool.

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He'd left home at twenty, gone to college, joined the Marines, married, raised a family, worked in five different states, visited most of the rest. This house—she automatically glanced around the high-ceilinged, narrow-windowed, fat-furnitured room—had merely been an overnight stop, a bed-and-breakfast, to Ward.

Until a year ago.

When his wife Emily died, he came "home," pleading loneliness, promising usefulness. He wanted to "be there" for his sister in her declining years. So now she cooked and cleaned and washed and sewed for two.

This place she loved and owned by squatter's rights just wasn't big enough for both of them. The errant ladder had seemed like a godsend. Now sighing, she retrieved the cloth swaddling her feet and attacked it anew.

During supper, Ward watched her like a guest unsure of his manners. He didn't taste anything till she did, didn't eat anything that didn't come from a community bowl. As his fork hovered indecisively over the last slice of his favorite spice cake, she grinned with what she hoped was maddening superiority, and he shoved away from the table, his expression fox-and-sour-grapesish.

Later she was washing dishes, up to her elbows in frothy water, and Ward ran into the room with a radio that was shuddering popular music at the top of its lungs. He heaved it triumphantly into the sink, staggering backward from peril's way, and then stared with her at the electric plug floating harmless and free on top of the suds.

The old fool.

And so it went. She left books and shoes on the stairs. He sawed the railing loose on the basement steps. She left the gas on and the fire off in the kitchen stove. He let the car motor fill the garage with fumes.

"Why don't you just move out?" she nagged.

"It's my house as much as yours—you move," was his stubborn refrain.

She put a snake in his bed, knowing it wasn't poisonous but hoping Ward wouldn't. When he didn't suffer a heart attack, she recalled belatedly that it was Fred, Ward's twin, who was extravagantly afraid of snakes. Fred had run away from home right after Mama did, and they were both dead or the world's worst correspondents.

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Ward pitched a string of firecrackers through her bedroom window, but her heart, too, was strong.

She sent off in the mail for an underground catalog advertised in a science magazine's classifieds. "Transform any aerosol can and its contents into a grenade! Create havoc, get revenge, evacuate buildings! Sold for informational purposes only!!!" She debated between "Make your own mace out of common kitchen substances" and "Electrify a commode for a total cost of $5.00," but decided neither was lethal. She ordered a handbook on poisons, "Sold strictly for educational purposes only!!!" and waited like a kid for Christmas.

Meanwhile, Ward had found Dad's shotgun and was pretending to go hunting so he could fire potshots at the house. The fact that they lived in a residential neighborhood on only one acre of land didn't help his credibility.

Before the neighbors became aware and incensed, Ward gave up the gun for a pit bull. Just home from the supermarket, Martha found herself pinned in a kitchen corner by naked canine teeth in a face not even a mother could love. Biting her own lip to save him the trouble, she managed to introduce three pounds of top round roast into his attention span, and when Ward arrived an hour later to mop up, the animal was already on a one-way ride to the dog pound.

They didn't sleep more than a few minutes at a time, lights and clothes on, like emergency-room interns expecting a disaster. They ate as furtively and alone as feral cats, spooked by the click of a door latch or the refrigerator motor cycling on.

Mine, Martha thought in the outer limits of sibling rivalry, wondering how to make him spontaneously combust. Mine, she was thinking when the doorbell rang and, less politely, rang again.

Ward stood on the front porch holding a lace doily crammed with violets. He had tried to disguise himself with a walrus moustache, a toothy smile, and a perfectly fitted suit. The tie scared her the most. She'd never seen him wear a tie, not even for Dad's funeral, when he'd sweated in a topcoat buttoned to his chin to avoid it.

"Martha?" he purred, prying open her hand to deposit the flowers. "Remember me?"

A duplicate Ward stepped onto the porch, hedge clippers menacing his thigh.

"Fred?" she accused the first man.

"Surprise! After all these years I've decided to come home to roost."

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He squirmed past her through the door and prowled to the kitchen. Martha and Ward followed him.

"Hasn't changed much. Except—" he squinted at the three shattered windows, the smoke-blackened ceiling, and the meat cleaver embedded in the back door "—it could use a little fixing up. I'll do that. Yessir." He scrubbed his palms and beamed.

Martha and Ward locked eyes and mentally shook on it.

"Tch, tch," Fred clucked, moving to the wall switch where a live wire dangled coyly. "I'll fix that," he said, feeling perfectly safe.

And very probably he *was*.

DETECTIVERSE

CANOE IMAGINE?

by RUTH P. SHIELDS

I can't stand my wife, thought Sam.
A vacation trip he planned.
The going was tough—
The rapids were rough—
Now she's water over the dam.

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

"Years ago," the man behind the desk said, "in those country-house murders, it was sufficient surprise for the butler to have done it. Most of them are a sight more ingenious than that, of course. There was the mad wife in the attic. There was the postman nobody noticed who actually carried the corpse away in his sack. Did you read that one?"

"I may have done."

"Chesterton. I met him once, many years ago. I've met them all. It dates me, doesn't it? Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie. She was a fiendish plotter. Sweet lady, though. Rather shy, in fact . . ."

YOUDUNNIT

by PETER LOVESEY

You.

Yes, you, reading this.

How would you like to be a character in this story? Take a deep breath. It's a murder mystery. If you suffer from nightmares, nervous rashes, or have a dicky heart, better turn to something less dangerous. But if you think you can take it, read on.

Now step into the story.

Someone speaks your name.

Cautiously you answer, "Yes?"

You find yourself in an office furnished simply with a desk and two chairs, the sort of room universally used for interviewing purposes. It might seem totally impersonal were it not for the glass-fronted case mounted on the wall in front of you. Inside is a large stuffed fish.

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"You may sit down. This will take a little time."

Although the bearded man behind the desk isn't wearing a uniform, authority is implicit in his voice and manner. He is broad-shouldered, with a thick neck. His head is bald at the crown, with a crop of grizzled hair at the sides and back as compensation. His age would be difficult to estimate, but he is obviously a long-serving officer who gives the impression that he knows everything about you and is interested only in having it confirmed.

He spends a moment looking at the papers in front of him. You are not deceived by the humorous sparkle in his brown eyes. You sense that it may shortly turn into an accusing gleam. But at the beginning he doesn't threaten. He starts on a quiet, disarming monotone, his eyes on his notes.

"Have you any idea why you are here?"

"Well," you say, "I was reading this crime story—"

He looks up with more interest. "So you read crime stories?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"Do you ever get ideas from what you read?"

This sounds like a question to duck. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"It's obvious what I mean," he tells you sharply. "So-called ingenious methods of murder. Anyone who reads crime stories knows how devious they are. Writers have been concocting murder mysteries for at least a hundred and fifty years, ever since Edgar Allan Poe. What was that one of his in which an orangutan turned out to be the killer?"

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue?"

"Right. I don't get much time for reading in this job, but I know the plots. Years ago, in those country-house murders, it was sufficient surprise for the butler to have done it. Most of them are a sight more ingenious than that, of course. There was the mad wife in the attic. There was the postman nobody noticed who actually carried the corpse away in his sack. Did you read that one?"

"I may have done."

"Chesterton. I met him once, many years ago. I've met them all. It dates me, doesn't it? Dorothy L. Sayers. Agatha Christie. She was a fiendish plotter. Sweet lady, though. Rather shy, in fact."

Not only does it date him, you think to yourself, it takes some believing. G. K. Chesterton must have died fifty years ago, at least. Theoretically, it's possible that they met, but it seems more likely that he's making it up.

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"You sound like a real enthusiast," you venture, still unsure where all this is leading. Is he doing this to make you feel inferior?

"The Agatha Christie story that impressed me most," he says, "was the murder that turned out to have been committed by the narrator of the story."

"Yes, clever."

"I came across one in which the detective did it. There's no end to the twists in these stories. One of these days I fully expect to find out that the reader did it. Not so much a whodunnit as a youdunnit."

You smile nervously. "That would be stretching it."

"Oh, I don't know." He eyes you speculatively. "You didn't answer my question just now. Do you get ideas from crime stories?"

"Not that I'm aware of," you say. "I don't know what use I could make of them."

He fingers his beard. "That remains to be discovered. Let's talk about you. Shall I lay out the essential facts? I want to ask you about a Saturday evening toward the end of last summer."

"Last summer?" Your hand finds the edge of your chair and grips it. This isn't going to be easy. Last summer was a long time ago. You have sometimes wondered how reliable a witness you would be if you were ever called to testify to something you saw the same day. But last summer—

"To be precise, the last Saturday in August. You were expecting a visitor, a rather special visitor—so special that you'd put a bottle of champagne on ice and—" He looks up and arches his eyebrows, plainly inviting you to continue.

You frown and say, "There's obviously some mistake."

He stares back. "What's your difficulty?"

"What you just said. It has nothing to do with me."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely."

He folds his arms. "What exactly is your difficulty? Remembering the day? It was an unusually warm, still evening. Still as the grave. Days like that deserve to be remembered. You *do* remember it?"

"The day?"

"The last Saturday in August."

"It isn't so simple. I suppose I could if something were to jog my memory."

He says with faintly sinister sarcasm, "If necessary I can arrange that. Let's get to the bubbly, then—the champagne. More up your street than trying to remember which day it was, I daresay."

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"What do you mean? I'm not in the habit—"

"I didn't say you were. But you wouldn't object to a glass of fizz on a sweltering Saturday evening in summer?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He presses on, unperturbed. "We're simply establishing the possibility of the scenario I gave you. It could have happened to anyone."

"Not to me."

"Let's put it to the test. You *have* drunk champagne at some time in your life? You don't deny that?"

You give a shrug that doesn't commit you to anything.

"Presumably you prefer it cooled?"

"Most people do."

"So if you *did* have a bottle of champagne—a good champagne, a Perrier Jouet '79, shall we say—you'd have sufficient respect to put it on ice?" He spreads his hands to show how reasonable the proposition is.

You refuse to be lured into some admission that will incriminate you. "Listen, it's becoming more and more obvious that you're talking to the wrong person. I'm not in the habit of drinking champagne on Saturday evenings."

"Pity. It would make you more cooperative. However, the point is immaterial. As it turned out, nobody drank the champagne."

A pause.

"As *what* turned out?" you ask.

He gives you a long, level look. "We're coming to that. Let's stay with the champagne a moment. You wouldn't drink it alone, would you? It isn't the sort of drink you have alone. Champagne is for lovers."

You stare at him and say, "This is getting more and more ridiculous."

"Is there someone in your life?"

"If there is, it's no concern of yours."

"Correction," he says before you have got out the words. "It *is* my concern. It assuredly is."

You press your lips together and shake your head.

He continues to probe. "Don't tell me you haven't a lover. Look, I may seem old-fashioned to you, but I know what goes on."

"Not in my life, you don't," you tell him firmly. "That's becoming clearer by the minute."

"All right, if it's the term 'lover' you object to, let's settle for friend,

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then. Intimate friend. Someone who makes your heart beat faster. This is a crime of passion—I'll stake my reputation on that."

"A *crime?*" Now is the moment to make a stand. "You're talking about a crime?"

"That's what I said."

"Involving someone I know?"

"Involving you."

You are silent for a moment. Then, with an effort to stay in control, you say, "If you're serious, I think I'd better ask for a solicitor."

His face creases into a pained expression. "Don't spoil it," he tells you. "We were getting on so well. Let's leave the love angle for the present. We'll go back to Saturday evening. No more beating about the bush. It was about nine. You were at home, alone. But your, em, visitor was expected any minute, so you had the champagne ready in a bucket of ice."

"All of this is rubbish."

He lifts a warning finger. "Have the goodness to hear me out, will you? You're getting the kid-glove treatment, but there are limits. You had the house to yourself because your spouse, is it?—or partner, is that more accurate?—was away for the weekend."

You sigh loudly and say nothing. Might as well let him continue. He's making a total idiot of himself.

"A romantic evening was in prospect. Soft music in the background. The Richard Clayderman album."

"I can't stand Richard Clayderman."

"Your lover can. The candles were lit. After your bath you'd put on something cool and sexy, a white-silk caftan."

You roll your eyes upward. "Me in a caftan?"

"Some kind of robe, then. We won't argue over that. Suddenly the doorbell chimed. You went to the front door and flung it open and said, 'Darling—' Then the smile froze on your lips, because it wasn't your lover on the doorstep. It was You Know Who, back unexpectedly from that weekend away."

"You're way off beam," you say. "This didn't happen to me. This is someone else you're talking about."

"You don't remember?"

"I haven't the faintest recollection of anything you've said. What's supposed to have happened next?"

"A blazing row. There was hell to pay with all that evidence of infidelity around you. Champagne and soft music wasn't the norm in your house. You just admitted that."

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"Did I?" You feel your mouth go dry. You thought you'd admitted nothing, yet there's a disturbing logic in some of what he's saying.

"You protested your innocence vigorously. You're pretty good at that. And all the time that this row was going on, you dreaded hearing the doorbell again, because you knew this time it would be your lover. Zap! You'd be finished, the pair of you. So what did you do?"

"Don't ask me," you say acidly. "I wasn't there."

"You panicked. You snatched up the full bottle of champagne and swung it with all your strength. Crashed it into You Know Whose skull. Murder."

"Untrue."

His eyes open wider. "How can you say it's untrue if you don't remember anything?" He leans toward you again. "You dragged the body across the room and shoved it into the cupboard under the stairs."

You're sweating now. It's apparent that he's speaking of something that really happened. A murder was committed and you're in grave danger of being framed, or stitched up, or whatever the expression is. But why? What has he got against you? Is there some piece of evidence he hasn't brought up yet? So far it's all been circumstantial. They need more than that to secure a conviction, don't they?

You decide to change tack. "Listen, it's clear to me that I need some help. How can I convince you that all this absolutely didn't happen? Not to me."

He leans forward and fixes you with his dark eyes. "You really know nothing about it? You'd swear to that?"

You nod and look earnest.

At last he seems willing to reconsider. "In that case," he speculates, "perhaps I got it wrong. *You* were struck with the bottle. You were concussed, so you remember nothing."

"Would that explain it?" you blurt out thankfully.

"So it appears."

"I'm innocent, then?"

He hesitates. "How's your head? Does it feel sore?"

You rub it, pressing hard with your fingers. "That part is tender, certainly."

"At the back?"

"Yes."

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He starts writing in his book, speaking the words aloud. "A blow on the back of the head, causing concussion and loss of memory."

You start turning mental cartwheels. "May I go, then?"

He looks up, grinning faintly. "No, I can't allow that."

"Why not?"

"Because there *was* a corpse found in that cupboard and it wasn't yours."

"A corpse in my house? That isn't possible. Whose corpse, for heaven's sake?"

His tone alters. "Watch it. You're in no position to talk like that. You asked whose corpse it was. I told you. It was the corpse of the person I referred to as You Know Who."

"And you hold me responsible? I thought we just agreed that if I was there at all I was out cold."

He shakes his head. "You regained consciousness after a minute or two and picked up the bottle and struck the fatal blow—a much harder one. Your victim's skull was heavily impacted. There's no doubt that the bottle was the murder weapon."

"I deny it."

"I wouldn't if I were you." He closes his book. "It's my duty to caution you now." He presses his hands together and stares at you solemnly. "Speak that which thou knowest and no more, for by thy words shalt thou be judged."

You gape at him. "That isn't the proper caution. Those aren't the words."

"They are in this place."

You stare around you at the walls, blank except for the stuffed fish above his head. "Where am I, then?"

He gives you a look with genuine pity in it. "This will come as a shock. You were found unconscious in your house. There was a box of pills beside you. That is to say, a box that had contained pills. Sleeping pills. You swallowed the lot after committing the murder. You've been in intensive care for months, in a coma."

"A coma?"

"I'm afraid you never recovered consciousness. You died in the hospital twenty minutes ago."

With heavy irony you say, "Oh, yes—and I suppose you're St. Peter."

But your words are lost in a vaporous mist that swirls over you. The floor sinks away and you find that you are almost weightless. As you drift lower, you glimpse the sandaled feet of your inquisitor.

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You recall his strange claim to have met Chesterton and the others, all dead writers. Then a man in a red uniform takes a grip on your arm and starts to draw you firmly downward.

Yes, youdunnit.

DETECTIVERSE

MODERN TIMES

by JEANETTE WEISS

When I was young, to solve a crime
You needed a detective,
Whose eye was sharp and mind was clear
And thinking was selective.
But times have changed and I predict
That I'll meet no refuter—
To solve a crime in future days
We'll go to our computer.

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Mad Dog reached into a pocket of his big coat and produced a jingling, shiny ring of keys and laid them on the bar. "These are the keys to First City Bank," he whispered. "They'll admit us everywhere from the little boys' room to the green, green vault . . ."

THE KEY RING

by DAVID PIERCE

"Hey, kid. You ready?" Mad Dog whispered.

I couldn't believe we were doing this: Mad Dog was busting out—and with my toothbrush tucked away in my sock along with a few dollars I'd managed to scavenge, I figured I was, too. Three months was more than enough time to spend behind bars for what Mad Dog and I had done, at least in the *way* we'd done it. We never used a weapon; we never hurt anyone, hardly; and we were *that* close to getting away with it, too.

It all started when Mad Dog asked me if I'd be interested in—robbing a bank.

"Go away, old man, you're bothering me." I took a long drink from my second beer and noticed that the tattered old man wasn't moving away, so I tried again. "I'm saving that seat for someone," I told him. Actually it wasn't a seat—it was a barstool. And I wasn't saving it for anyone in particular, either, other than the tall long-legged blonde I was hoping would walk through the door and plant herself on that stool.

"Aren't you the least bit curious as to how we'd do it?" the old man asked.

"Do what?"

Then he leaned in close like the blonde was suppose to, the Eau de Whiskey was overpowering, and he whispered, "Rob a bank."

"No, I'm not," I said. "Now I told you, old man, that seat—"

"Mad Dog."

"What?"

"The name's Mad Dog. People call me Mad Dog because—"

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"I don't really care."

Then the old man got real quiet, as if maybe I'd hurt his feelings, and I thought for a moment he was about to leave. But he didn't. He just sat there swirling his drink around in his glass meditatively. Then he said, "Considering tomorrow will be payday for most people, meaning the bank should be pretty well stocked up, we could probably walk away with fifty, maybe a hundred grand. No cops, no lights, no alarms." He winked one reddish-yellow eye at me.

A hundred thousand dollars?

But I couldn't take someone who wore a long woolen coat in the summertime seriously. He was a bum and a drunk. His hair was long and shaggy, a messy tangle of grey that looked like an old mop left out to dry on the back-porch railing. He was probably only in his forties but he looked in his sixties. And he nursed that drink with a passion I figured should be reserved for a tall long-legged blonde. No, I couldn't trust the man. I'd take my chances with Temporary Services. I'd find another job.

A hundred thousand dollars?

I called for my third beer. A couple more of these, I thought, and I'd forget about my disastrous day. I was a light-bulb salesman up until about 9:30 that morning, when I'd made a quick stop at the Piggly Wiggly to deliver the biggest order of my short-lived career. I had my arms full of those fancy chandelier bulbs—teardrops, flickering flames, and all—when a runaway shopping cart clipped me from behind and a week's pay shattered to dust on the pavement right there beneath the giant neon pig.

A hundred thousand dollars? No. Temporary Services would be just fine. I'd make my minimum wage, garner a few benefits, holidays, vacation time. Mad Dog? Why do they call him Mad Dog? A nice nine-to-five job was what I needed—a daily routine, a little stability. A hundred thousand dollars?

"Just exactly what are you talking about old—Mad Dog?"

Mad Dog gave me a jagged jack-o'-lantern smile and I wondered if he'd ever played hockey or boxed.

"I'm talking about these," he said. He reached into a pocket of his big coat and produced a jingling, shiny ring of keys and laid them on the bar. "These are the keys to First City Bank," he whispered. "They'll admit us everywhere from the little boys' room to the green, green vault."

That broken smile of his was lethal and my pulse quickened.

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"Where'd you get those?" I asked. Of course I didn't believe a word of it.

"Had 'em made," Mad Dog said, returning to his drink.

"What are you talking about?"

He rubbed his growth of beard thoughtfully. "I spend a lot of time just down the block from First City Bank. You might even say that's my home. Of course, you won't see no mailbox with Mad Dog painted on it."

"Tell me about the keys."

He frowned. "I was going to. One night this important-looking man was leaving late like I'd seen him do a lot of times, locking up behind himself. Only this time when he slid into that fancy car of his, I noticed he dropped something—something big and shiny. So when he drove off, I ran over and picked those up." He reached over and touched the keys on the bar.

Pulse down. "Well, don't you think he's missed them by now? He's probably had every last lock changed." I was surprised to find myself slightly disappointed.

Mad Dog laid a finger aside his temple, indicating a working brain beneath that shaggy scalp, and said, "I had copies made."

"What?" Pulse back up.

"Copies. A friend of mine works at an all-night key shop and made me some copies. You're looking at a man who's spent some time locked up. To me a key is a treasure, every last one worth its weight in gold—or in this case, maybe even more. So after I'd had the copies made, I went back and put the original set of keys down in the exact spot where I'd found them. And sure enough, it wasn't ten minutes later that that fancy car came back and the man jumped out, kind of frantic, you know. He stumbled around in the dark for a while before he found them, and when he did don't you know he gave them a big old kiss."

As Mad Dog turned the bottom of his glass to the ceiling, I said, above the pounding of my pulse, "So the keys you have will fit."

"Everything." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Doors, alarms, security cameras, vault timer. We can go in and out like VIPs for a night. You interested?"

He was asking the same question he'd asked earlier, only now it didn't seem like such a crazy notion. In fact, it seemed too good to be true. "So how come you're asking me, anyway?"

Mad Dog ordered another drink and told the bartender I'd take care of it. I didn't deny it. He waited for the drink to arrive and he'd

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had a chance to sample it before he answered. "Well, I need someone to help me carry out all that money, don't I?"

At 4:00 A.M., Mad Dog and I stood on the darkened stoop of a downtown department store across from First City Bank.

"Nice outfit," he said to me, and I shrugged, thinking he had no room to be sarcastic. I was brand-new to the crime business, so I didn't know what to wear other than what I had seen on TV: black slacks, black turtleneck, and a black ski-mask with eyes, nose, and mouth holes.

"You got the keys?" I whispered through the fuzzy mouth hole.

"Got 'em right here." He slapped the pocket of his woolen overcoat. "Okay—ready? Follow me."

I trailed after him into the orange glow of the sodium streetlamps, a bum in a long, flowing coat followed by a shadow. The street was deserted except for a few empty cars that lined the curb on both sides. My car was parked in front of the bank. I had parked it there earlier that afternoon, before shopping for something to wear to a bank robbing and killing ten hours at the International House of Pancakes.

First City Bank was all plate glass across the front. The glass was tinted, but that didn't matter at 4:00 A.M., because a dozen eight-foot cool-white fluorescent lamps lit up the lobby like a Christmas tree. Undaunted, Mad Dog approached the front door as if he were the bank president. I stayed glued to his back.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" I asked.

"Settle down, kid. I've watched that guy with the fancy car do this a hundred times. One key on the side of the jamb here will turn off the alarm. Just watch that red eye above the door."

I watched, but nothing happened. Mad Dog jingled and jingled, trying one key after another. If it had been December, children all over town would have been at their windows, searching the sky.

After about five tries, the red eye went blind.

"See?" Mad Dog smiled. "We're VIPs tonight." In the shadows of the night, his smile was a piano keyboard. "Now for the door lock."

I tapdanced so much while Mad Dog searched through the ring of keys for the right one I was beginning to feel like Gregory Hines.

"Hurry, hurry—headlights!" I grabbed Mad Dog's coat collar and plunged us both to cover behind my car. He lay on top of me, his shaggy hair falling across my nose hole, and I could smell the same cologne he'd worn earlier.

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"What the—" he started.

"*Car,*" I whispered into his ear and he went deadly still.

"*Keys,*" he whispered back.

I turned my head and saw the ring of brass and chrome keys dangling from the lock, sparkling like silver and gold. The car was too close to make a dash for them now.

The car moved slowly by, tiny chunks of gravel popping and crunching beneath the tires. A stark halide glow crept along before it, threatening to wash over Mad Dog and me. Looking up from the ground past the muffler of my car, I watched the white glow slowly recede like a tide, the car's wheels roll on by, and the bottom half of the city Police Department decal on its door.

"Cops!" I whispered into Mad Dog's ear.

He growled like a mad dog.

When the street was once again silent and orange, Mad Dog rolled off me and I could breathe. "Come on," he said. "It'll be a while before they make another pass."

I was all ready to give up my new-found life of crime, had even turned my back to First City Bank to walk away, when Mad Dog turned the very key that had dangled from the lock as the police cruiser had driven by, and there was the solid sound of a deadbolt sliding back into its chamber. Mad Dog pushed the door open. Silence. No alarms. No strobing lights. Just a complete silence that bade us to come on in. So we did.

Mad Dog crawled to a corner that was sectioned off into a square by a desk, a credenza, some file cabinets, and some bookshelves. Following, I reached the desk, raised up and peeked over the top edge to read the nameplate: PRESIDENT. Mad Dog was snooping around. *Sniffing?*

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I believe the vault timer's over here somewhere. Banks nowadays have these fancy timers so that the vault won't open until the clock says to, sort of like an alarm clock." He read the concern on my face. "I said *like* an alarm clock. Don't worry."

"Where is it?"

Mad Dog traced a small wire from a junction box on the floor to the bottom drawer of the desk. He tapped a finger against the walnut and pulled on the drawer, but it was locked. Back to the keys. It took him nearly ten minutes before he found the right one. Finally, he pulled the drawer open and peered into it.

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"It's here," he announced. "Now all we have to do is turn the clock up to—what time do banks open? Nine?"

I nodded nervously, wondering why he hadn't checked that out beforehand—that and when the employees begin to arrive. Mad Dog reached into the drawer, fidgeted with something for a moment, and then removed his hand and looked up dejectedly. "It's locked."

Now, how did I know it would be?

"Just give me a minute," Mad Dog said. But I didn't have another minute.

"I've got to go to the men's room," I told him, and turned to crawl away.

"Wait!" He was still whispering. I stopped and looked back over my shoulder. "You'll need this." And Mad Dog worked a single key off the ring and handed it to me. The word MEN had been stamped on one side. "I knew that one would come in handy."

When I returned, Mad Dog was gone. But a much more attractive sight greeted me: the vault door was ajar. It had been pulled back, revealing its foot-and-a-half thickness and exposing a series of complicated bolts and latches that Mad Dog had managed to open by merely moving the big hand on the clock ahead a few hours. There was a crack of light from floor to ceiling. Every few seconds the crack of light was broken by a shadow—Mad Dog was inside.

I crawled up to the vault and pulled the door back. Mad Dog motioned for me to hurry inside. I did and pulled the door to behind me, leaving it partially opened. Mad Dog had found the key to the cash drawers and stood over bundles and bundles of fresh green money waiting to be harvested.

"And how much do you need today, sir?" he asked.

"Oh, about ten grand," I played along. Mad Dog picked up five new bundles and, with a flick of his wrist, tossed them to me one at a time. I caught them all, laughing. "Did I say ten? I meant twenty." And Mad Dog flicked five more bundles at me.

"And forget the interest," he said, waving a hand in contempt of the word. "It does my heart good to see a satisfied customer." And he continued to toss money at me, bundle after bundle.

Obviously I wasn't going to be able to carry all of this. Where were all the money bags with big dollar signs printed on them that were supposed to be lying on the vault floor so bank robbers could haul away the loot?

Mad Dog must have read my mind because he unbuttoned his coat

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and there, sewn to the lining, were more pockets than could be found at a kangaroo farm.

He made me put the coat on. After all, I had signed on as chief money carrier. We stuffed the coat full and figured we had at least the one hundred grand we'd estimated earlier over drinks. When we were fully loaded, we worked our way out to the car, using the keys in reverse. Mad Dog had memorized each key on the way in, so he locked up everything as we crawled out. With the final turn of the proper key, the red eye above the front door came back on.

Silence. Robbing a bank had been—how do the big boys say it on TV?—a piece of cake.

Mad Dog, a lot skinnier without his coat, slid in on the passenger side of my car. I lumbered in behind the wheel, a hundred grand heavier.

Car keys!?

Ignition empty.

Pockets empty.

"Do you have the keys?" I asked, my voice rising through the sentence. I checked my pockets again, moving slowly because of the hundred grand.

Mad Dog jingled his ring of keys happily.

"No. *Car* keys," I said, my voice still rising.

Mad Dog growled.

"The bathroom!" I said. "I put the men's room key on my ring so I wouldn't lose it. I must have left—" I was looking past Mad Dog into the once again highly secured First City Bank.

Mad Dog growled a second time, jingled the big ring of keys not so happily this time, and left.

He disabled the alarm and re-entered the bank much faster than it had taken him the first time. Was I looking at a serious career move here?

While I was waiting for Mad Dog to return, drumming the steering wheel nervously with sweaty fingers, that white glow of light returned, and this time it flooded the car and froze me to the seat before I had time to think about plunging to the floor. I waited and waited.

From far away, barely audible above the beating sound of my heart, I heard a car door open and slam shut and then another. I heard hard-soled shoes on the asphalt, moving closer to the car. Then someone shined a three-hundred-candlepower beam into my eyes.

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"Going skiing, mister?" the officer asked.

"I'm suppose to meet my buddy here at any minute," I heard myself, "and then we're going straight to the lake. Fishing for walleye and striper, you know—early-morning fish."

I thought I detected the faintest trace of a nostalgic smile on the officer's face. "Yeah. Wish I were going," he said. His partner nodded sympathetically.

"Oh, me, too, officers," I said. "I mean, hate to see a man stuck at work when he'd rather be fishing."

"Mighty big coat you're wearing, isn't it?" asked the one with the flashlight.

"Well, yeah, but it gets cold out there on the lake in the mornings—even in the summertime."

I waited forever and I hoped.

And they bought it. I hadn't felt this much relief since Mad Dog had rolled off me earlier. The one with the flashlight killed it and said, "Okay. Come on, Jim, let's leave the man to wait for his friend. He's got some fish to catch." They turned and began to walk away, but before they reached the cruiser I heard the most bloodcurdling scream I've ever heard in my life.

"Oh, God! It's Mad Dog!" the officer with the flashlight wailed as a blur streaked across the hood of their car.

At the booking room downtown, I got a good look at the teeth marks in the officer's forearm. The wounds were gapped just like Mad Dog's smile. He had never finished explaining that they called him Mad Dog because every time he sees a policeman he goes as crazy as a mad dog.

"I said, are you ready?" Mad Dog whispered again.

Toothbrush, fine. Savings account closed out. "Yeah, I guess so," I answered, patting my stuffed sock. Mad Dog had chosen the late afternoon to pull this job off. He figured we'd be less conspicuous with the sun up and people milling about than we would be at 4:00 A.M.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" I asked.

He growled like the old Mad Dog, but with the shave and the haircut and the three months of drying out, he didn't look like the same one.

Everyone at Big Mountain Prison knew Mad Dog. He was a bank robber from way back. Messed up then, too. He'd resumed his old position in the prison key shop once we arrived. Only this time he'd

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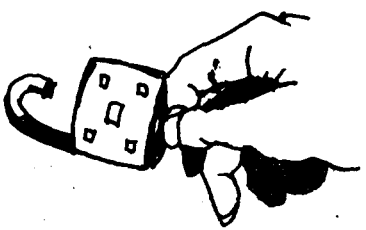
gotten hold of the warden's key ring somehow and made copies of all of the keys before returning it.

A bright-red sign on the door read AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. The lock clicked and Mad Dog pushed it open. Silence. No alarms. No strobing lights. A piece of cake.

We both took a long look at freedom, shiny and sleek. "Where to?" I asked my buddy. The smile he flashed my way was undoubtedly Mad Dog's—and the only weapon we'd armed ourselves with for the escape.

As we drove through the main gate, Mad Dog told me about a rich friend of his in Malibu who'd been paroled earlier. Mad Dog said this friend had expressed a great interest in his idea about a chain of key-making shops along the West Coast.

"Okay, you can open your eyes now," I told him once we were through the main gate and safely past the uniformed guards. Mad Dog checked the Rand McNally and pointed right. I turned the long car, set the cruise control for the legal speed limit, and thought, Now, who would have guessed it—Mad Dog and me driving off into the sunset in the warden's Cadillac?



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ON OUR COVER

Malachy McCourt, actor *(Mass Appeal, Da, The Hostage, Plunkitt of Tammany Hall; Two for the Seesaw, The Molly Maguires; The Dain Curse, You Can't Go Home Again, Ryan's Hope)* and raconteur (the *Malachy McCourt Shows* on New York radio and TV, *Tonight* and the *Merv Griffin, Dick Cavett,* and *Mike Douglas Shows),* was born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised in Limerick, Ireland. Appropriately enough, since Arthur Conan Doyle was born into an aristocratic Irish family, he here plays Sherlock Holmes (this time in disguise as Santa Claus) to Ronan O'Ceallaigh's Baker Street Irregular. Ronan, nine, the son of Irish consul-general Daithi O'Ceallaigh, was born in London, presently lives in New York, and is not really a Baker Street Irregular—yet. Two days after this cover shoot, on June 16, Malachy and Ronan conspired once again, participating in the 8th annual *Bloomsday on Broadway* readings from James Joyce at New York's Symphony Space.

A word about the Baker Street Irregulars, who also meet annually to celebrate their writer—and "that world where it is always 1895." In his Introduction to *Sherlock Holmes by Gas-Lamp: Highlights from the First Four Decades of The Baker Street Journal* published this year by Fordham University Press, Philip A. Shreffler writes, "Even before the formation of the Baker Street Irregulars, there were Sherlockians sounding deeply into the Holmes Canon, discovering therein innumerable inconsistencies seemingly emanating from Dr. Watson's poor memory, faulty perception, or deliberate discretionary obfuscation of the facts in Holmes's cases . . . In 1934, a small group of American Sherlockians, the Baker Street Irregulars, gathered for the first time in New York, put drinks in their hands and such problems on the table." The organization, now anything but small, has included such diverse members as Ellery Queen, Basil Rathbone, Christopher Morley, Vincent Starrett, Isaac Asimov, Rex Stout, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt—who makes a case for Holmes being an American, not English, in an April 1955 *Baker Street Journal* piece reprinted in *Sherlock Holmes by Gas-Lamp.*

Speaking of Holmes, Watson, and the Baker Street Irregulars, for those of you who missed it at movie theaters or want to see it again, the delightfully comic *Without a Clue,* with Michael Caine and Ben Kingsley, is now available in video cassette from Orion Home Video.

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a *NEW* Simon Bognor story by

TIM HEALD

Simon and Monica arrived early at Marylebone and found Ivor Bradley-Smallrat parking his bicycle. He was wearing white flannels, a vivid pink-and-green-striped blazer, and a similarly ribboned panama hat.

"Ah, Monica," he exclaimed, somehow contriving to undo his bicycle clips and embrace Mrs. Bognor in the one single swooping gesture. "Jolly good to see you. Jolly good to see you, too, Simon. Jolly good of you both to come. Should be a jolly good day." He rubbed his big pink hands together and grinned wolfishly. "I could do with a real British Rail breakfast, don't you think?"

"The appeal of Tim Heald's mystery novels," writes Carol Cleveland in Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *"is based on the anti-heroic qualities of their hero, their relentlessly irreverent prose, and a solid core of social satire." The same is true of his mystery short stories, of course, and never more so than in this one . . .*

THE OBITUARISTS' OUTING

by *TIM HEALD*

Bognor had first met Ivor Bradley-Smallrat on one of those ineffable weekend courses to which the professional man becomes prone if he wishes to get on in his chosen career. Bognor was not greatly bothered about getting on in his chosen career but his boss, Parkinson, had been told that there was one vacancy on the course—"Whitehall and the Media"—and he would be required to fill it from his staff at the Special Investigations Department of the Board of Trade. That meant Bognor.

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The course had naturally been a waste of time, except that Bradley-Smallrat had been lecturing in his capacity as Deputy Foreign Editor of the *Morning Post* and he and Bognor, recognizing kindred spirits, had escaped to the village pub for bitter and chatter. Six months later Bradley-Smallrat had been "moved sideways" (his phrase) to be Editor of the Obituaries Column. He and Bognor, firm acquaintances for life, had come to an informal arrangement whereby Bognor was Obituaries Consultant for the Civil Service. Whenever a Whitehall mandarin toppled off the perch, Bradley-Smallrat or his assistant Dorothy Tomkiss would be on the line asking either for a brand new five hundred words or for some corroborating facts, anecdotes, or opinions to bolster the valedictory notice already on file. In the case of very senior civil servants indeed, Bognor wrote longer obituaries while they were still alive. These were delivered to the *Post,* buffed up by Bradley-Smallrat or Miss Tomkiss and then fed to the *Post*'s computer to be disgorged at the appropriate moment.

Bognor enjoyed writing the obits. Under the new regime, a note of sardonic realism had crept into the column, so that he was able to use the pieces—anonymous, of course—to pay off the occasional lingering score. He had particularly enjoyed writing his boss's obituary and peppering it with such phrases as "notoriously short fuse," "essentially parochial vision," and "he had few outside interests." Obituary writing also involved the occasional lavish lunch and surprisingly good money to top up his modest Board of Trade salary.

Not to mention the Annual Obituarists' Outing.

Every year the obituaries staff, and one or two sympathetic *Post* employees from letters, "defense," or the diary, would accompany assorted freelance obituarists on a jolly day out. One year they had gone to Boulogne for lunch. On another occasion they had taken a box at Lord's cricket ground—they had picnicked at Glyndebourne, raced at Chepstow, and played a cricket match against the Combined British Undertakers. This year Bradley-Smallrat had arranged a trip by special steam train to Edgebaster, home of the great Edgebaster and Bradbury locomotive factory, now a steam museum.

Simon and Monica, Mrs. Bognor, arrived early at Marylebone and found Ivor Bradley-Smallrat parking his bicycle. He was wearing white flannels, a vivid pink-and-green-striped blazer, and a similarly ribboned panama hat.

"Ah, Monica," he exclaimed, somehow contriving to undo his bicycle clips and embrace Mrs. Bognor in the one single swooping

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gesture. "Jolly good to see you. Jolly good to see you, too, Simon. Jolly good of you both to come. Should be a jolly good day." He rubbed his big pink hands together and grinned wolfishly. "I could do with a real British Rail breakfast, don't you think?"

The Bognors nodded agreement and Ivor led the way into the station, where Miss Tomkiss was already doling out tickets and programs to a huddle of bleary-looking obituarists, most of whom were already known to each other and to the Bognors, if only from previous outings. There was Brigadier Popjoy, the retired Military Correspondent, who specialized in soldiers but could turn his hand to sailors and airmen when asked; Sir Norman Flute, the Art Historian; Peregrine Twentyman, the retired silk who looked after judges, barristers, and Real Tennis players; Stewart Porringer of sport, an area jealously guarded by Bradley-Smallrat so that Porringer was only let loose on very minor figures unless they played Association Football, a game the Obituaries Editor despised. Gavin Chu, the poet, essayist, novelist, and man of letters was there in his habitual deerstalker and so was Daphne St. John Smart, who wrote, naturally, about "society."

A young man named Crabbe, previously unknown to Bognor, had been newly recruited to write about the world of pop music, drugs, and sex—an area previously neglected by *Post* obituaries. Bognor was particularly pleased to see Cyril Haslinghurst, the onetime Liberal MP, bon viveur, raconteur, luncher, lecher, and all-round bad hat. He particularly enjoyed Haslinghurst because he was so very obviously up to no good. Other obituarists and *Post* staffers brought the total number of the party to twenty-seven, but these were the people best known to Bognor and, on the whole, most liked.

"Bland not here?" he asked. Hugo Bland did minor royalty, minor canonry, and minor public schools. He had been at school with Bognor, though in a different house.

"Indisposed," said Bradley-Smallrat. "Not at all well, as a matter of fact. But he has sent his obit."

"You're not serious about the obits?"

"Naturally." The party began to move toward the barrier and the chocolate-and-cream Pullman coaches beyond, rich with the promise of kippers and mixed grill.

"I haven't done mine." Bognor lengthened his stride to match Ivor's.

"No problem. You can knock it off over brekker. Bland's is jolly

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good, actually. Did you know that he was related to the Lincolnshire Blands?"

Bognor didn't.

It was a good breakfast. The Bognors sat at a four with Haslinghurst and Brigadier Popjoy.

"First-rate scoff," said the Brigadier, buttering toast as they passed Denham Golf Club. All along the track, train spotters with tripods and long lenses snapped them as they passed by.

"Strange way to amuse oneself." Haslinghurst had persuaded their waiter to fix Buck's Fizz. "Not a recreation you often find in *Who's Who*." He sipped his drink. "Had you heard that the *News* are trying to poach the delectable Miss Tomkiss?"

"Becoming a damned competitive business, obits," said the Brigadier. "That Massingberd fellow at the *Telegraph*'s had a lot to do with it."

They passed through Gerrard's Cross.

"I hope she's not leaving." Monica was fond of Dottie Tomkiss.

Haslinghurst leered. "No way Ivor would let that happen," he said. "Tomkiss is far too valuable in any number of different ways. Mind you—" he lowered his voice and leaned across the table, pulling at his familiar black eyepatch "—I have heard it said that certain other parties have been making a fairly concerted pitch for Bradley-Smallrat himself."

The Bognors tried to look knowing, but the sudden advent of Miss Tomkiss herself put an end to this line of talk.

"You people all know the drill?" she said. She was looking more than usually desirable, thought Bognor, in that figure-hugging black polo neck which so prettily set off the remains of her summer holiday tan.

"All present and correct." Brigadier Popjoy delved into the recesses of his Harris Tweed jacket and produced a brown envelope with OHMS in one corner. "Four hundred and ninety-seven words," he said, "give or take a hyphen or two."

"You are a sweetie, Brigadier." Dorothy Tomkiss kissed his forehead and he went an even pucer shade of pink. "Mr. Haslinghurst," she said. "Obituary, please."

"Of course, dear girl." Haslinghurst's work had been composed in real ink on the back of a number of envelopes. They were not quite cross-hatched, but spidered and blotched in a passable imitation of a literary manuscript of, say, later Dylan Thomas.

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"I'm afraid I haven't done mine," said Bognor. "I didn't think you were serious."

"Never more so," said Miss Tomkiss. "In fact, you're very lucky to have been allowed on the train without it. If you haven't done it by the time we leave Edgebaster, we'll leave you behind."

"You wouldn't." Bognor wiped marmalade nervously from his shirt front.

"We would. If there's going to be a grand reading during dinner, then everyone must be included. Frightfully invidious otherwise."

"It's all right." Monica snapped open her handbag and pulled out a neatly typed brace of double-spaced pages. "I did it for him."

"You never." Bognor snatched at the papers, but only saw enough to read, "Simon Bognor who d y'day was one of the Board of Trade's—" As Miss Tomkiss firmly removed the second page, he also read the last sentence, which was, "He is survived by his wife, Monica."

"That's a bit ripe." Bognor was genuinely piqued. "What makes you think you'll survive me?"

"I don't smoke cheroots, I'm not two stone overweight, I work out, and I'm not under constant stress for no reason whatever." She eyed his thick-buttered toast. "I've given up butter, too."

"Come on, chaps," said Brigadier Popjoy as Miss Tomkiss passed back down the carriage, bumping gently against the sides of the seats, "less of the old marital discord. I want to catch up on the goss. For a start, why no Bland?"

"Indisposed," said Bognor. "Not at all well, according to Bradley-Smallrat."

"Indisposed, my eye," said Haslinghurst, stubbing a cigarette into the remains of a grilled tomato. "That's a load of tosh. I saw Bland only yesterday. In the London Library, immersed in piles of old Bradshaws and histories of obscure private-railway systems. He was actually reading something called *The Missing Special*. I assumed he was boning up for today."

"Did you speak?" Bognor, of whom it had once been said—in public, too—that "he had an unerring instinct for untimely death," experienced a sudden and inexplicable tingling of the spine.

"Certainly not!" Haslinghurst lit another Gauloise. "Bland by name but not by nature, in my view. In any case, I was late for lunch and he was engrossed."

"And did he look ill?" Monica seemed to share her husband's intuitive unease.

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"No more than usual." Haslinghurst laughed and then started to choke, took a frantic glass of water, and allowed himself to be hit quite hard between the shoulderblades with the flat of the Brigadier's hand.

When this emphysematic convulsion had passed, the Brigadier leaned forward and said, "Is it right that Bland's bonking Miss Tomkiss?"

"I understand he was walking out with Daphne St. John Smart," said Monica.

Haslinghurst imbibed fizz. "Left-handed little bugger," he said. "I always assumed he was having a ding-dong with the Chu person."

"I," Bognor spoke with the authority of an adult lifetime of acquaintance, "always assumed he was one of life's eunuchs. Not interested in carnal knowledge animal, vegetable, or mineral."

"Oh, Simon, darling." Mrs. Bognor patted her husband's podgy hand. "You can be so *naive*. In any case, you can't have carnal knowledge of a vegetable."

"Now who's being naive?" asked Bognor.

"I heard," said Popjoy, seeking to pour oil on these troubled marital waters, "that the *Times* were trying to poach Norman Flute. As a matter of fact I was told they offered him fifteen hundred quid to do David Hockney. Payable in claret."

"Where did you hear that?" Haslinghurst wanted to know.

"At my club, as a matter of fact."

Haslinghurst laughed again, cautiously this time. "Not the sort of gossip one normally expects at the Rag. I heard that some Canadian millionaire's starting up a weekly magazine devoted entirely to obits."

"I heard it at my other club, actually." The Brigadier was miffed.

"Dead topical," said Bognor. "Why is it that death has suddenly become so fashionable?"

No one could answer this. Instead, all four peered out morosely at the pockets of photographers and spotters still lining their route. A few minutes later, they were saved by the drinks trolley.

They were all merry by the time they arrived at Edgebaster St. Tristram's, with its mock marble, its hanging baskets, and its typical Basque creperie—a jewel in British Rail's crown.

"Okay, chaps," said Bradley-Smallrat, "the Brigadier's leading a party to the site of the Battle of Edgebaster, Sir Norman is guiding another round Saint Penda's Abbey, Porringer's leading an assault

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on the terraces at Edgebaster Thursday's home game against Clapham Athletic, and I'm making a beeline for the historic Duck and Compasses. Then we all meet up at the headmaster's study between four and half past for cucumber sandwiches and a guided tour of good old Edgebaster Coll, which is, I understand, the Alma Mater of Gavin Chu."

Gavin winced and gave a hitch to his PEN Club Lugano Conference shoulder bag.

"Anyone who becomes hopelessly entombed in the Duck and Compasses or similar," he continued, "must be back at the station by five minutes to six, which is when the train departs Eustonward. As you know, British Rail waits for no man. And there's nothing after that till the milk train, which arrives in the small hours and doesn't even have a buffet."

The massed obituarists grinned.

"Okay, gang," said Bradley-Smallrat. "Dismiss!"

And so, in Edgebaster, the obituarists went their separate ways. It was a crisp, sunny, un-English day and the Bognors trawled through the town on their own. A beer and a sandwich in a backstreet pub—not the Duck; a browse through a couple of goodish second-hand bookshops, where Simon almost bought a battered copy of *John Gilpin's Ride* with Ronald Searle illustrations for 50p; a peep into St. Penda's, where they overheard enough of Sir Norman Flute's echt-aesthetic lecture to make them leave sharpish and have a coffee in a tea shoppe overlooking the river; finally, a wander through the market, where Monica bought a pair of tights and Simon a jug which said *A Present from Edgebaster* on the side.

"Funny if we did all drop dead," said Bognor, panting. Edgebaster College, which bore a startling resemblance to St. Pancras station, was at the top of the hill.

"Not my idea of a joke." Monica had brought sensible shoes and was making the pace.

"Tempting fate, though." Bognor paused and tried to catch breath under the obviously false pretense of enjoying the view. "Tempting fate to make us all write our obits like that. Even if just one of us keeled over, it would seem a touch macabre."

"Is that your way of asking me not to walk so fast?"

"Not at all. It would be awfully neat for the *Post,* being able to collect all the obits fresh from the corpses."

"Don't be disgusting. Anyway, it would have to be Dorothy

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Tomkiss's corpse. She's collected them all up. Now do hurry, we're late for the head beak's tea party."

She was right. As they cleared the brow of St. Penda's Mount, they could see the hands of the clock on the Great Tower nearing 4:30. At the foot of the Great Tower, just in front of Great Gate, a small person lurked.

"Oh, look," said Monica, "Gavin Chu's late, too."

"You're late for tea, Gavin," said Bognor as soon as they were within hailing distance.

"Thank heavens I found you," said Gavin. "I must have a quick word. In private." He glanced at Monica.

"No secrets entre nous," said Bognor. A white lie, but not a whopping one.

Gavin didn't seem to like this, but time obviously pressed.

"This mustn't go any further," he said. "But Hugo Bland has asked me to sound you out about writing for his new magazine."

"What new magazine?"

"*Valete.*"

"*Valete.* Pretty grabby title." Bognor sniffed.

"It's Latin," said Chu, patronizing him.

"I know it's bloody Latin," said Bognor irritably. "I *was* educated. Why should I want to write for Bland's new magazine, and what is it?"

"It's a weekly devoted entirely to dead people."

"Terrif," said Monica.

If looks could have killed, Chu would have consigned her to the opening number of the new magazine.

"The pay is very good," he said. "Hugo's backer is amazingly big in the death business in the States and he's moving into Britain in an equally big way."

"I'm sorry—" Bognor was aware that he sounded priggish but he had never been afraid to seem prim "—but my first loyalty is to Ivor."

"Hugo will pay double."

"No," said Bognor.

"Several of the others are moving over."

"That's their problem."

"Are you absolutely certain? Hugo needs to know tonight."

"I thought he was supposed to be ill. Obviously not. Anyway, if that's all you've got to say, Gavin, I suggest we make speedy steps for the headmaster's study. I'm dying for a cucumber sandwich."

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"Many a true word," muttered Gavin Chu in a melodramatic corner-of-the-mouth conversation stopper, adding, "but you're making a big mistake."

If nothing else, they were exceedingly good cucumber sandwiches. None of your mimsy crustless garden party/Palm Court nonsense, these were good tuck-shop doorsteps, heavily peppered. The headmaster was a similar mixture—a blustering exterior concealing the cool within. Bark *and* bite. Bognor found him alarming and took refuge in trying to compose his obituary.

Once inside the headmaster's study, there was an atmosphere among the obituarists. Mingled as they were with a similar number of well scrubbed Edgebaster sixth-formers, their corporate sense of unease was dissipated. But it was still almost tangible.

Only Bradley-Smallrat seemed immune.

"Detained in the Duck, I suppose," he said, spraying crumbs and cucumber down his I Zingari tie.

"No, actually. We've been remarkably active. Seen all sorts of things. Taken lots of exercise." Bognor wondered whether to say anything about Gavin Chu's unpleasant overture on behalf of Bland. He decided not. Discretion was an integral part of the Bognor armory. He was not a boat rocker and he saw no point in disturbing Bradley-Smallrat's poise and equanimity. *Valete* would almost certainly be stillborn. Why upset Ivor with news of a birth that was as likely as not to be aborted?

"I gather the Brigadier's battlefield tour was extremely gory," Bradley-Smallrat grinned. "The Brigadier revealed a positively Stephen King-like relish for a certain sort of detail. Incidentally, one or two people have decided to stay overnight so they can catch some choral evensong at St. Penda's. It's up to you if you want to join them, but I've made it plain that they'll have to pay their own hotel and the journey home tomorrow."

Bognor's hand checked momentarily in its passage from sandwich plate to mouth. He glanced at Monica. She glanced back.

"Not some idea of Gavin Chu's," he said. A suspicion was crystallizing in his subconscious. It wasn't wholly identifiable yet but it was emerging.

Bradley-Smallrat seemed surprised. "Not at all. Gavin's effectively tone-deaf. And also passionate about choo-choos. He wouldn't miss traveling home by steam."

"I see." Bognor did not see. Not yet . . .

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They were a depleted band by the time they entered the station buffet at Edgebaster St. Tristram's. Flute, of course, was absent. So was young Crabbe. And there was no sign of Daphne St. John Smart. On the other hand, those that survived did represent a definite corps d'elite. Brigadier Popjoy was of the party. Ditto Porringer, who had seen Edgebaster Thursday come from behind to win 3–2. Also Haslinghurst and Dorothy Tomkiss. And Chu.

Chu's presence confused Bognor. His suspicion was, sort of and up to a point, that the decision to attend evensong was part of the plot to launch *Valete*. Obviously the defectors had all decided to stay on in Edgebaster while the loyalists went back on the train as originally planned.

But if so, why? And why was Chu on the train? Chu was Bland's stooge and recruiting agent. If Bognor was right and the defectors were all still in Edgebaster, why wasn't Chu among them? It didn't make sense.

In the Pullman, they took up the same positions as they had occupied on the outward journey. The obituarists had the entire coach to themselves. In the morning this had made for a convivial gathering, with a certain amount of spare space but enough bums on seats to make it seem like a party. Now there was no disguising the fact that they were a rump. Too many empty seats. They rattled around like a pod short of half its peas.

"I say—" Haslinghurst removed his cigarette holder and leaned across the table, almost knocking over the half bottle of Veuve Clicquot he had picked up in an Edgebaster off-license "—I was propositioned by little Chu on the battlefield. What about you?"

The Brigadier frowned. "He came up to me with some bizarre proposal about doubling my money if I went over to the other side."

"Me, too," said Bognor. "A new magazine about dead people."

"That's the one," said the Brigadier.

"Can't see the appeal of a comic devoted entirely to stiffs myself," said Haslinghurst, "but Chu said there was a lot of heavy money in it. Some of which has already attached itself to Hugo Bland if we're to believe what he said."

The train jolted over points and past rows of dimly lit terraced cottages, windows curtained against the inquisitive gaze of passing travelers like the obituarists. Dinner was to be served shortly and the attendant passed among them, taking orders for the filet de boeuf Brunel or the maigret de canard Peter Parker. Little smuts from the engine snuck in through window gaps and flecked the

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antimacassars with smudgy black. In subdued voices, the Bognors and the Brigadier and Cyril Haslinghurst talked of death. Aperitifs mingled with apprehension as the 6:30 Special from Edgebaster steamed south.

It happened in a tunnel.

First the lights failed.

The Bognors had been expecting something, and so, though they might not have realized it, had most of Bradley-Smallrat's party. There was a crash, then a scream, then the abrupt braking of the train and a clatter of falling cutlery and china, a hissing, a high-pitched human moaning. Moments later, a buzz of speculative chatter.

Bognor, standing up, saw that the moaning came from Gavin Chu, who was clutching his chest with one hand while the other clung to the communication cord. There was something—a knife? a cross-bow bolt?—sticking out of his chest and blood everywhere. Hot steam hissed from the engine, protesting at this unexpected halt.

Things now happened with a speed that even Bognor, with his wide experience of criminal violence, found quite bewildering. First of all, the lights came on again. Then two uniformed policemen appeared as if by magic and ordered calm and silence. There was a noise of walkie-talkie offstage, a sudden flashing light and siren, then two white-coated stretcher-bearers hurried in, laid Chu out, and removed him to what, one could only assume, was a waiting ambulance. Outside, Bognor could hear sounds which even to his untutored ear seemed to suggest uncoupling. Theirs was, he realized, the last coach on the train. Then, seconds later, there was another crunch from behind.

Now a third policeman, some sort of inspector in a flat cap, entered. He carried a swagger stick, gloves, and a field telephone which crackled.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I regret to have to tell you that every person in this coach is under suspicion of murder. The ambulance attendants have made every effort to revive the unfortunate gentleman, but I have to tell you that their efforts have been in vain.

"In view of this situation, I have arranged for the remainder of the train to proceed on its way to London while this single coach will return to Edgebaster, where the murder enquiry will be head-

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quartered. Until we arrive back in Edgebaster, I must ask you to stay in your places and to remain absolutely silent."

Outside, the steam engine could be heard beginning to move the bulk of the train away toward London. At the other end, there was a more mundane clanking and humming. It sounded to Bognor like a small diesel—some sort of freight engine. All three policemen executed stiff salutes. The senior said, "One of my men will be riding in the cab. The rest of us will proceed immediately to Edgebaster to await your return." And then he was gone, almost as swiftly and mysteriously as he had arrived.

Very slowly their coach began to gather speed. They passed through the tunnel, where the lights did not fail again, and out into the open, where presently the rows of terraced houses with their muffled lights came into view once more.

The whole incident had taken little more than the twinkling of an eye.

"Curious," said Monica.

"Shhh," said her husband, law-abiding.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "They've gone."

"They got here very fast," said the Brigadier.

"Left in a hell of a hurry, too," said Haslinghurst.

Bradley-Smallrat walked up, pale and shaken.

"Rum do," he said. "And Dotty's not in her seat. Do you imagine she's in the loo?"

"I hope so. She's got all our obits." Bognor glanced out of the window at the lights. They were retreating now. The world beyond the Pullman seemed impenetrably black and fraught with menace. They passed a signal box and Bognor momentarily glimpsed a signalman pulling at levers. There was something about the man which seemed oddly familiar but he couldn't quite place it.

"You know something?" Bradley-Smallrat peered out into the dark. "We seem to be going back by a different route. We didn't pass that dirty great crane. Ruined, by the look of it."

The track was very poor quality stuff. The train was juddering and shaking. Every obituarist had to hold onto his glass with tight clasp. Bradley-Smallrat sat down on the Brigadier's lap.

Suddenly Bognor leapt to his feet. "Watson!" he exclaimed as he fixed Haslinghurst with a frenzied stare. "Did you say Bland was reading *The Missing Special* in the London Library?"

Haslinghurst fingered his eyepatch. "The thing about only having one eye," he said, "is that it tends to compensate for the loss of the

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other. I'm proud to say that I can see twice as well with one as most men with two. And, yes, he was reading something called *The Missing Special*. Whatever that may be."

"Illiterate!" squawked Mrs. Bognor. She, too, stood, and in a remarkable display of marital togetherness both leapt at the communication cord. For the second time in less than half an hour, there was a clatter of crockery, a scream of steel, the acrid smell of burned brake-lining, the massed swearing of disturbed writers.

At the end of it, however, the train stopped. Bognor, with an alacrity that belied his wind and girth, ran to the door, jumped out, and sprinted—well, jogged—to the front of the truncated train. As he had surmised, their historic engine was now superseded by a superannuated small tank engine of only marginally post-Thomas vintage.

The cab was empty and the track decrepit. In the lights of the engine, the Bognors could see some twenty or thirty yards ahead. Only half that distance was tracked. After ten or fifteen yards, the line just vanished. Shaking rather, the Bognors, now followed at a discreet distance by the remaining obituarists, walked to the point where the line vanished and found themselves staring out at a vast disused quarry. Beneath them, the cliff face fell away into a deep, black, fatal nothing.

"Hmm," said Bognor, "the nearest-run thing you ever saw in your life. As the Duke said to the actress. Or someone."

It called, eventually, for champagne—champagne consumed in the *Post*'s Obituary Office the morning on which Hugo Bland's obituary appeared. In a spirit of rare magnanimity, Bradley-Smallrat had carried Bland's obit unchanged and exactly as he had handed it in.

"Of course," he said, waving his silver tankard toward Canary Wharf, "it's a pack of thundering untruths, but what the hell. And it was a sad end."

This was true. Bland had pulled the old carbon-monoxide trick with the rubber tubing attached to the exhaust pipe of his Morris Minor in the garage of his three-bedroomed semi somewhere unexotic south of the river. A lengthy confession, full of lachrymose remorse, had been posted to Bradley-Smallrat on the morning of the death.

Bradley-Smallrat had passed it among the loyal obituarists but not to the police. There seemed no point. It was an incredible quan-

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tity of gambling debts which had prompted the defection to *Valete,* the attempted massacre, and the subsequent suicide.

"God knows how he got himself into such a muddle," said Bognor, "but I believe anything of a man who lives alone with a cat."

His wife told him not to be such an oaf.

Dottie Tomkiss poured more champagne. There was a question mark over Dottie, who was not in the loo as supposed but was found wandering by the abandoned signal box from which Bland had switched the points. She claimed she had jumped from the train. Or been pushed. She seemed unclear but pleaded concussion and amnesia, which was consistent with slight facial contusions. On the other hand, it seemed at least possible that she was party to the plot but had been abandoned by Bland—blamed, possibly—when things had gone wrong and the Bognors jumped to conclusions and the communication cord.

As told in Bland's confessional, the whole thing had been absurdly simple. The defectors were, naturally, to be spared. The death of the loyalists would have, on the one hand, wiped out the new magazine's most serious opposition and, on the other, provided *Valete* with a tremendous scoop for its launch issue. (This was where suspicion focused on Dotty, for *Valete* would have wanted the self-written obituaries and only Dotty had them. But Ivor Bradley-Smallrat didn't want to suspect Dotty any more than she wanted to be suspected.)

Gavin Chu, who was not to be charged since nothing could be proved without the confession, had staged the knifing himself with the help of fake blood from some theatrical agency. The "policemen" and "ambulance men" had been laid on by the mysterious millionaire backer of *Valete.* They had lain in wait at the mouth of the tunnel and moved into action so quickly that everyone else was too stunned to suspect them. All matters pertaining to the railway had been the product of bribery, ingenuity, Bland's intimate knowledge—hence the disused track to the lethal quarry—and an assiduous reading of that classic railway murder story, *The Missing Special,* which both Bognor and wife recalled in the nick of time.

"As an old school friend, or at least contemporary," said Bognor, "I thought I might pen one of those addenda which, in my opinion, add such a distinctive flavor to a good obituary page. You know the sort of thing. Perhaps you'd allow me to read it out loud."

Bradley-Smallrat said yes and Bognor cleared his throat and read.

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"S.V.T.B. writes—" He coughed and screwed his eyes at his dreadful handwriting. He really ought to see an optician.

"Oh, do get on with it," said Monica.

There were times when he didn't think he liked his wife very much.

"In your notice about Hugo Bland, the obituarist, you failed to mention the almost pathological tardiness which dogged him from his earliest years. Even at school it was universally acknowledged that Bland Mi would be late for everything from corps to chapel. Unfortunately, what was a joke at school became a liability in adulthood. It could even be argued that his untimely demise was partly due to failing to turn up in time for a crucial train departure. Sadly, he was all too aware of this failing and indeed admitted, shortly before his death, that 'Sometimes I fear I've missed the boat of life.' "

There was a longish silence.

"Did he really say that?" asked the Brigadier.

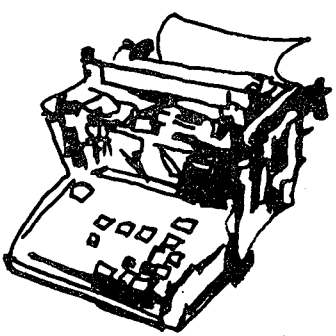
"Well—" Bognor fidgeted "—not in so many words."

"My biographical husband has added a new terror to death," said Monica. "To paraphrase Sir Charles Wetherell."

Bradley-Smallrat looked bleak and uncomprehending.

"I think," he said, "that readers of the *Morning Póst* have probably had enough of Hugo Bland. In fact, as Obit Editor I declare that this obituary is now closed."

And they all drank to that.



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JAMES POWELL (about Maynard Bullock)
ANDREW VACHSS (about a family resemblance)
EDWARD D. HOCH (about the trial of Ben Snow)
ROBERT TWOHY (about Park Warrior)
GEORGE BAXT (about a widow's pique)
ERNEST SAVAGE (about a fugitive)
ROBERT BARNARD (about a "domestic" murder)

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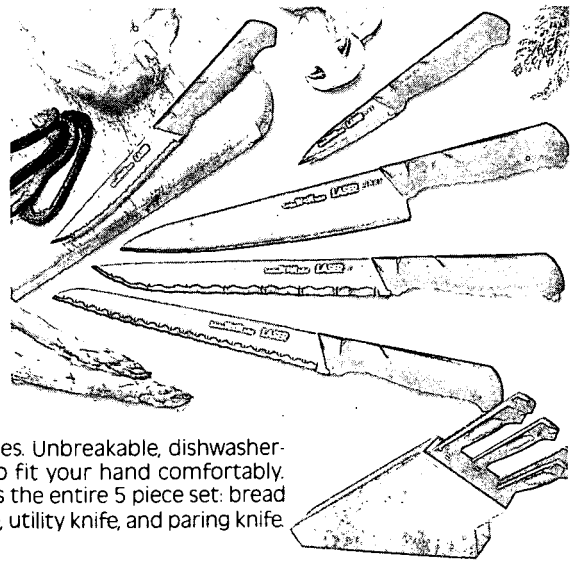
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST



The secret behind Regent Scheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife. **$129.98** ($7.00) #A1933.

▼ THE MAGICAL SPARE BED

It's almost like pulling an extra bed out of a hat. Unlike most spare beds that gobble up storage space and are unwieldy to move, this one rolls down to fit a 36"-long, 3"-diameter canvas case, to stash in a closet corner, car trunk, camper, anywhere. Yet it unrolls in minutes to a full-size 27" x 73" bed that will even accommodate 6-footers, supports up to 500 pounds and is comfortable to boot. The secret's in the inventive construction: a cotton canvas sling is supported on laminated steel legs with 6 steel springs for cushioning and stability on rough ground. Toss the carrying strap over your shoulder and go — camping, beach, poolside; the 10" legs keep it off damp ground and sand. Of course, this bed is indispensable at home, country home, dorm — even for kids in motel rooms. A superb value at **$61.98** ($12.25) #A1931.

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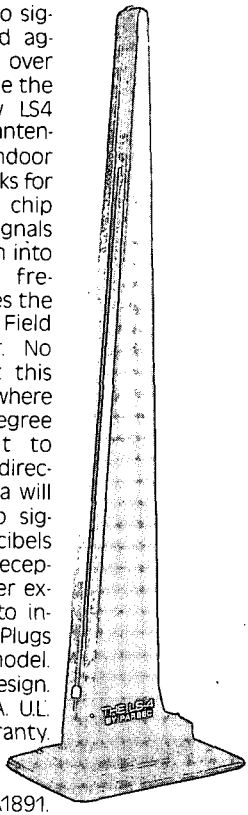
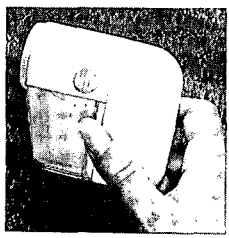


Eliminate radio signal fade and aggravating cross over signals that garble the sound. The new LS4 omni-directional antenna is the only indoor antenna that thinks for itself. The micro chip brain receives signals and isolates them into individual clear frequencies. Features the Gallium Arsenide Field Effect Transistor. No need to redirect this antenna. Leave it where it is and its 360 degree radius allows it to receive from any direction. This antenna will boost your radio signals up to 24 decibels for the clearest reception you have ever experienced. Easy to install, light weight. Plugs into any stereo model. Unique modern design. Made in the U.S.A. U.L. listed. 1 year warranty. Dimensions: 3" x4.125" x 17.25". **$58.98** ($5.25) #A1891.

▼ LIFT THE LINT



Removes lint, fuzz & pills from clothing, fabrics, furniture. This powerful, delicate, fabric shaver restores used sweaters, skirts, etc. FABRIC SHAVER works wonders, on one "C" cell battery (not included). Convenient removable storage bin for easy cleaning. **$9.98** ($2.00) #A1794.

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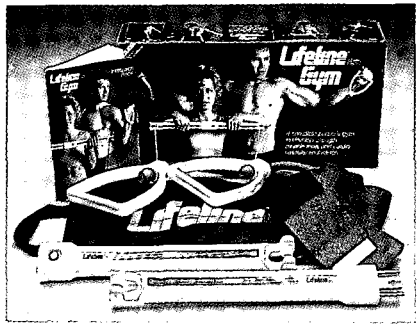
▼ A PORTABLE GYM TOO GOOD TO BELIEVE



This portable lifeline gym is a 2 pound gym that can tone and shape all the muscle groups in your body in ¼th the time required by barbells. The secret is dynamic variable resistance supplied by it's indestructible design that instantly adjusts from three pds to 350 pds of resistance. Illustrated exercise booklet tells you how to move from one exercise to another. It comes with a 27" lifting bar, breaks down in the middle with stainless steel locking pins, jogging belt, 6½ cable, door attachment and foot stirrups, neatly packed in its own carrying case. In addition, it converts to become a unique treadmill, pulley system and variable resistance machine. **$48.98** ($5.00) #A1937.

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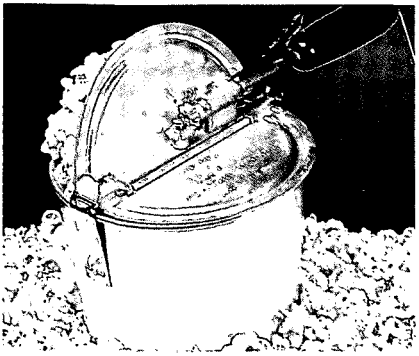
▽ GOURMET POPCORN



Most electric and hot-air poppers "puff" the corn more than they "pop" it, leaving it tough with hard centers. This flat-bottomed stove-top popper reaches 475° and pops full in two minutes with 4 quarts of the best popcorn you ever tasted. Stirring paddle with through-the-handle crank virtually eliminates burnt or unpopped kernels. Wooden handle for safe grip, two dump lids. Pop without oil for delicious diet popcorn. 370 calories per 4 qt. bowl. Produce tender, fluffy, old fashioned movie theater popcorn, **$21.98** ($4.50) #A1876.

▽ INNOVATIVE IONIZER

A sophisticated electronic device that uses nature's way of cleaning air — emitting trillions of negatively charged ions that act like magnets, attracting microscopic particles of dust, smoke and pollen. One belongs in every room, but sometimes a table-top ionizer just isn't practical or desirable for reasons of space or your decor. This tiny unit (1½"x3") provides an ingenious solution, plugging right into any wall outlet, where it will remain inconspicuous while performing its mighty task. With "on" indicator light and collector pad that can be rinsed and, eventually, replaced. By Pollenex, for fresher air in home or office. **$39.98** ($4.00) #A1867.

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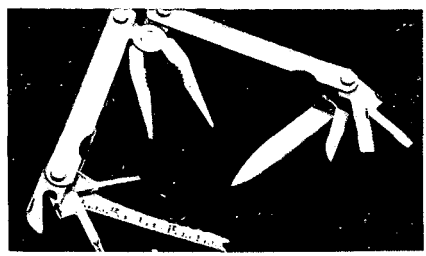
Hold an entire workshop in the palm of your hand or stash in pocket. Weighing in at 5 ounces and folding to just 4½" long, it opens to a full-size set of pilers (needle nose at tip, regular bolt grabbers in the middle and sharp wire cutter at the base). Plus 2½" knife; 4 screwdrivers, (jeweler's, medium, large and Phillips); awl/punch; file, can opener; fish scaler and ruler. Stainless steel; **$25.98** ($3.00) #A1712.



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